



# *Portals*

*A literary journal by  
Purdue University North Central students*



# ***PORTALS***

*A Literary Journal*



Purdue University  
North Central

2000

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*Nancy C. Howell*





# PREFACE

*Portals* has always been a wonderful opportunity for some of our talented students to see their writings in print. But *Portals* will now benefit a different type of student: the behind-the-scenes student editor. Unlike previous editions, *Portals 2000* is actually a product of a new course on copyediting. With the extra instructional input of Joy Banyas and the enthusiasm of the students, this copyediting course helped launch *Portals* into the 21st century.

The student editors worked hard, day and night, pounding away at sentence structures and nailing down wayward commas. Using the winning entries from the writing contest, these students learned the process of copyediting. They analyzed complex compound sentences, developed consistent spelling patterns, and treated language as a sophisticated form of communication. They even reformatted the journal, building a thematic structure, rather than the previous generic one. Ultimately, while building a new *Portals*, they challenged and encouraged the professor. Today, in front of you, you will find the culmination of their efforts. Thanks go to Kathleen Breitingner, Deloris David, Courtney Kane Ellman, Amanda Hise, Mary Kirkpatrick, and Kristin Schumacher, the inaugural copyediting class.

Of course this little success story is not quite over. *Portals*, as you read it today, would not be possible without the dedication of the judges. They have devoted time and energy to evaluate all the submissions to the writing contest. *Portals* and the student editors would like to thank the following judges: Dr. Pat Buckler, Dr. Mick Loggins, Dr. Jane Rose, Dr. Tom Young, Prof. Lee Block, Prof. Ann Carver, Prof. Marc Kniola, Prof. Maxilyn Voss and Prof. Susan Wood. Finally, I also want to thank the editor of *The Spectator*, Kristi Brosmer, who arranged to have copy available to the copyediting students. And I also want to thank Darren Young who not only wrote the copy but also introduced me to a new “phat” language. For all these reasons, the student editors, the copy suppliers, the stray proofreaders Lesa Cotto and Katie Newman, and the contest judges deserve “props.”

The editors appreciate Chancellor Jim Dworkin’s financial support. We are also indebted to Darlene Nelson, Jean-Ann Morton of Letters and Languages, Joy Banyas and Karen Prescott of the Publications Office for their equally tireless work.

Dr. Susan Hillabold

Director of the Writing Contest and Editor of *Portals*



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# REFLECTIONS ON LIFE AND MORTALITY

*David Riley*

*Lesa M. Cotto*

*Phil Keller*

*Terri Bartels*

*Janet Lee Lanning*

*Nancy C. Howell*





*David Riley*

## **PETS: A SATIRICAL VIEW**

**H**ow many of us grew up with pets in our lives? A dog? A cat? Or maybe a bird? Most of us had pets, and pets were a lot of fun, were they not? They were even more fun if they were smart enough to understand us and perform tricks for us, and no one enjoyed a stupid pet. I recall a point in my childhood where I was the proud possessor of a pet rock, and I swear that it was the dumbest thing I ever had. It was given to me by my fourth grade teacher on gift exchange day. I thought that it was cool at first because I was the only kid in our neighborhood who had a pet rock. Some had dogs, others cats, and some even had gerbils. Not me, no sir! I had a pet rock! I can remember the other kids walking their dogs, teasing their cats with strings, and petting their rabbits. They were fond of their pets and heaped tremendous amounts of adoration upon them, just as I did with my rock. I often wondered, however, why my rock did not return any of my affection. It never licked me on the face or purred as I pet it, but it was always there for me.

Yes, my rock was faithful, but soon the novelty began to wear off because I could not teach it to do anything. It would not roll over, it would not jump, and the only trick it seemed to have mastered was playing dead. I recall running home from school each day to play with my rock. I would throw a stick across the yard and tell my rock to fetch it, but it would just sit there on the grass, oblivious to what was going on.

"Come on, boy," I would encourage it with a whistle. "Fetch the stick!" I would even go as far as running across the yard on all fours and picking the stick up with my mouth, but my rock never grasped the concept. One day my father came outside and asked me, what was I doing.

"I've got a pet rock, and I am teaching it how to fetch a stick," I replied.

"Boy, there is no such thing as a pet rock," my father said with a quizzical look upon his face.

"There is too, " I replied stubbornly. "My teacher gave it to me."

My father threw his hands up in defeat and said, "Rocks in your head, that is what you have."

As my father walked away in disgust, mumbling that it was almost time for

dinner, it suddenly occurred to me why my rock would just lie there and not move. It was hungry! I did not know what to feed it, so I snatched it up, jumped on my bicycle, and peddled to the nearest pet store. I jumped off of my bike, ran inside, and blurted out, "What do rocks eat?" The clerk took one look at my rock and me and apparently thought I was mentally challenged, because he sold me some fish food.

Despite my rock's obvious shortcomings, I did not give up on it, and I carried it with me everywhere I went. One day at school some older boys tried to take my lunch ticket from me, and without thinking, I threw my pet rock at them and hit one of them upside the head. Much to my surprise, they took off running, and they never bothered me again. After that incident, if anyone tried to bully me, I would pull out my rock, and he or she would run away. My rock was not a pet after all; it was a guard rock.

I also like dogs, and, unlike rocks, you can teach a dog a few tricks. Most dogs are reasonably intelligent, loyal, and faithful to a fault. For instance, your spouse can run off with another person, the repo man can repossess your car, and your boss can fire you from your job, but through thick and thin who is going to be there by your side? Your dog. He will always be there to bring you your slippers, lick your face, and never give you any bad advice. Why are dogs so faithful? It is because when good ol' Rover was a cute little puppy, we beat him into submission. What do we as dog owners do when that adorable little puppy makes poo-poo on the carpet? We snatch him up, spank him, and then we rub his nose in the poop. While he is sitting there in misery, the neighbor's dog hops the fence and comes over to offer condolences.

"Dang puppy," he says while offering the puppy a Kleenex. "You must have poo-poo'd on the inside grass?"

"I had to (sniff sniff) go," the puppy replies.

The older dog places a paw around the puppy's shoulder. "I feel your pain because it was not too long ago that I found myself in a similar predicament. You see, puppy, the humans really do not understand us at all. They put diapers on their babies, but they expect dog babies to hold it until they feel like letting them outside so they can do it on the outside grass."

"But the inside grass (sniff-sniff) is softer," says the puppy.

"Yeah, I know, but the humans do not poo-poo on the grass, so they would not know that bit of information."

"What should I do?" the puppy asks.

"The next time you have to go," the older dog replies. "Just go to the nearest door and start scratching on it. If that does not get their attention, bark a few times, and they will let you out."

"Really?" The puppy asks.

"I do it all of the time, kid. Sometimes I do it just so I can get some fresh air, or so I can visit the poodle that stays up the street. It is real simple, kid, if you know a few of the do's and do not's."

"Like what?" the puppy asks.

"Have you seen that big, white bowl in the bathroom, the one with the pretty blue water in it?"

"Yes."

"Don't let them catch you drinking out of it, because that is where they poo-poo, and they get real upset if we drink from it. So upset, in fact, that they will put us in jail."

"What is jail?"

"They actually call it the Animal Shelter," replies the older dog. "But trust me when I say that I have seen a lot of dogs go in, but I have never seen any come back out. One other thing...."

"Yeah."

"Always find somewhere to hide when *The Price Is Right* comes on."

"Why?"

"Because that senile old fool Bob Barker is on this campaign to have us all spayed and neutered."

"What is spayed and neutered?"

"Trust me, kid, you do not want to know," the older dog replies as he exits the porch and jumps back across the fence.

"Gee, thanks!" the puppy yells after him.

A dog will take that kind of treatment from its master because dogs are codependent, but cats are not. If you snatch a cat up, spank it, and rub its nose in some poop, a cat will take its claws and draw tic-tac-toe diagrams on your exposed skin. Cats are independent, and they are sure to react differently than dogs. Throw a stick across the yard and tell your cat to go fetch it, and this is what you will get: Your cat is going to look at you and say, "Do I look like Lassie to you, fool? Do I bark? Why are you disturbing my catnap?" Throw a ball across the room, and your cat will walk over to it nonchalantly, sniff it, and then turn around and say, "This is not food. Quit playing with me and throw some food over here."



Get angry at your cat for something and throw it out on the porch, and I guarantee you that your cat will not take it lying down. It will calmly sit down, lick its paws and fur, and after grooming itself, it will say, "I know you did not just up and kick me out of my house!" Your cat is not going to cry and beg to come back in; your cat is going to get even. It will find the nearest field and catch a bunch of field mice, and upon returning to your home, it will release them into your house. A few hours later, after you notice that mice have invaded your home, you will hear your doorbell ring. Upon answering it, you will look down and see your cat sitting there as pretty as it pleases, grooming itself. It will look up at you and say, "I hear you have a rodent problem."

You nod your head in agreement.

"Well, I can fix that for you, but first we have to renegotiate my contract," says your cat. "First, the dog stays outside. Better yet, put it in the Animal Shelter so it will not continue to disturb my catnaps. Second, I want my diet to consist of Fancy Feast supplemented with real fish. Stop poisoning me with that three-cans-for-a-dollar crap or dog food when your cheap ass runs out of cat food. I am a cat, not a dog. Third, when we travel by plane I want to ride in first class with the rest of the family. I am tired of traveling in a damn plastic box, stuffed between someone's luggage. Fourth and final, if the house catches on fire, I better be the first person you save. The last time I had to sit on the windowsill with smoke blinding me and flames roaring all around, waiting for some fireman to come and save me. I am not trying to be on *Real TV*. Now, do we have a deal?"

You nod "yes" in defeat.

"Good. Now let me in because it is cold out here," says the cat as it brushes past you.

Pets are wonderful companions, but I do not think that we humans take enough time to look at the world through their eyes. If we did, we would probably see the world in a more humorous light and learn to better coexist with our fellow human beings.



*Lesia M. Cotto*

## PATCHWORK

**G**inny felt the urge to run. Granny was here. "The quilt," Ginny thought, "she wants to work on the quilt." Now that Ginny was eighteen, Granny would want to start making the squares that Ginny would add to the quilt. The quilt was the work of five generations of Hale women, and now it was Ginny's turn to add to the family legacy. Such an old fashioned thing. To sit around for hours with her grandmother and sew! How could she add squares to a wedding quilt when Bobby was so far off? Drafted. Gone.

Ginny and Bobby had been inseparable since they were three and four years old when the Carsons had moved into the house next door to Bobby's family. The pair had grown up together. Bike rides, games of tag, and skinned knees were endured together. They were two All-American kids living in the suburbs. No one in the neighborhood was shocked when the pair started going steady in the ninth grade. Bobby's class ring still hung from a chain around Ginny's neck.

"Ginny, Granny's here!" Ginny's mother called a little apprehensively. "Time to get this over with," she thought. As Ginny jumped out of bed, she knocked a brass picture frame off the nightstand.

"Shit!" Ginny whispered as she collected the shattered glass, and studied the damage to the prom portrait of her and Bobby. The glass from the brass frame punctured tiny holes in the photo, right across Bobby's chest.

Silent tears caressed Ginny's cheeks. She missed him. She would always miss him. Right now so close to the pain, Ginny could not control her grief. Bobby's absence from the block party last night was a void that nothing could fill. The families of Elm Street had held the neighborhood block party every Fourth of July for the past 15 years. Ever since Ginny was three she had gone to these parties, and Bobby had always been her companion. Ginny and Bobby ran and played as little kids. As teenagers, the pair would wander aimlessly, hold hands, and stare longingly into each other's eyes. The holes in Bobby's image were bitter reminders of the danger Bobby had been in.

What a magical night Ginny's prom had been. Ginny knew that everyone thought prom was fabulous, but for Ginny, that night was poignant because that was the last time she saw Bobby. She wore white satin, and Bobby cut a majestic figure in his dress uniform. Bobby was one year older than Ginny, so the draft had

gotten him six months before. Bobby had gotten a weekend pass to be with Ginny that night. He pulled guard duty for a month to be at the prom. Ginny had been aware that soon he would have to go back and take that long boat ride over the ocean. Ginny pressed the corsage Bobby gave her for the prom in her scrapbook. It was fading, but it once was red roses and baby's breath. Bobby's father, Mr. Jones, had given the keys to the Olds to Bobby, and Ginny's dad slipped \$20 to Bobby, while Ginny's mother snapped pictures with her Polaroid camera. The happy couple left the house amid the soft sounds of tears.

Ginny didn't mind that her mother had cried. All big family events—births, weddings, and funerals—made Ginny's mother cry. That night Ginny's mother, Ruth Carson, understood that these happy, carefree days would soon be over. She wept for her own lost youth and shed tears for the lost youth of her daughter. Ginny's father's generosity was no secret either. He really wasn't a generous man, but for his only child, Bill Carson would have tied a rope around the moon, if she wanted it. Bill had worked two months worth of Saturday overtime to buy the lovely white dress for Ginny to wear.

The young couple arrived at the dance, and spent a few of the last carefree hours of childhood in the glow of friends. Boys and girls looking straight into the abyss of adulthood danced, drank punch, and planned rendezvous for later that evening. Streamers, balloons, and flowers that decorated the gym were soon dispersed among the class of '67 as souvenirs. These young couples seemed to understand that someday they would need to prove to children, grandchildren, or themselves that they once had lived the carefree days of youth.

"Ginny?! Come give your Granny some sugar!" No use putting it off Ginny thought as she tossed the broken glass into the wastepaper basket. She ran a brush through her long golden hair, wiped tears from her expressive gray blue eyes, and pinched her cheeks hard to give color to her face.

Ginny walked down the stairs. As she descended, she was aware of the relief in the faces of her mother and grandmother. She recognized that healing needed to begin, and these women were a part of her healing. Now that her life was turned upside down, Ginny had to pick up the shattered pieces. She was pleased that she could make the older women happy for a short time. Bobby was gone, and Ginny had been consumed with fear for him. Everyday she went to the mailbox praying a letter would give some assurance that her lover was all right. The endless waiting. The endless hours spent wondering. But that was all over now. Ginny's family was concerned for her, but no one knew just how to console her.

"Sweetheart, let's start to decide what kind of block you will add to the quilt," Granny offered, as Ginny kissed her wrinkled cheek. The heirloom was hung over Granny's left arm. In her right hand was the cane that Granny used for support. Could that cane support the pain of two women? Ginny looked into the same gray blue eyes she had seen in the mirror only seconds ago. Virginia Hale was in her sixties. Ginny was often called "the spitting image of Granny Vicki." The first time Ruth looked into her daughter's eyes, she knew the only name that would fit the tiny baby was Virginia Hale Carson.

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Looking out of the window of a drab green helicopter, Bobby was reminded of the delicate ashes made when his father put a newspaper in the campfire. The ashes floated in the air, black with lacy touches of orange. Floating with the ashes would be the aroma of fresh deer meat, fish, or some other game killed during the day. As the helicopter neared the ground, Bobby thought about the hunting he would do now. Could he kill a man? The ground came closer the jungle grew dense, and the ashes turned into embers of smoldering villages. With each foot of descent, Bobby was reminded of the war.

Two months in the rain, heat, and war had taken a harsh toll on Bobby's platoon. Young faces that flew in the helicopter with Bobby were now gone forever. Life in the moist climate had exacted tribute, just as Charlie had. Bobby just could not seem to keep his feet dry, and now with feet that were red and covered with blisters it was painful for Bobby to walk. Each step with the heavy pack sent waves of pain through Bobby's body. The blisters would burst under the strain causing greater pain. He willed his feet to support the weight of his body and field pack. Only fear kept him moving. Waiting and distraction were dangerous indulgences. Why am I here? Why are any of us here? Existential questions were a waste of time.

Bobby shut his eyes hard. The sun broke through the canopy of trees high over his head. "It stops raining here so fucking fast," he thought. His language had developed the same brutality that his face had. His face hadn't been washed in at least a week. His green eyes were circled and red due to the lack of proper sleep. His face had lost its youthful roundness. The freckled boy was gone. In his place was a gaunt, severe, and bitter young man. Bobby hated all the downtime his platoon had endured for the last few days. March for days in the relentless



rain, and hurry up to sit and wait. Waiting for something to happen was a dangerous thing.

Bobby wanted to get Ginny's image out of his head. He needed to think. Concentrate. Shutting his eyes wouldn't work. He knew every line of her face. He needed her softness now. He needed goodness. He prayed for forgiveness. The pain inside was more than he could bear. Waiting meant time to think. Think about the faces exploding, the screams that sounded like the pit of hell. His own actions causing pain, creating his own hell. "I have to do something" he told himself. Maybe a few selfish moments wouldn't hurt. Rummaging through his bag, Bobby found a pen and paper. He wanted to write letters to his family and Ginny. Writing helped to keep the tears of homesickness and fear out of his eyes.

After finishing a letter to his mom and dad, Bobby started to write to Ginny. He told her he loved her and missed her. He said that he couldn't wait to be home. To just hold her for a few moments. Would she be able to heal his pain? "Just a minute," he wrote, "something is happening. I'll see what it is." Bobby scribbled the last line and ran as he stuffed the letter in his shirt pocket.

"Incoming!" an anonymous voice shouted from somewhere behind Bobby. Bobby turned to run, but he was too late. The mortar landed about three feet from Bobby's feet.

"Mr. Jones?" The Western Union man did not have to deliver the bright yellow envelope. Wartime made the young man's job difficult. He hated the look of anguish in a mother's eyes. He hated the screams that came out of young wives. The Jones family understood the delivery boy's purpose; Robert David Jones Jr. was dead. Bobby's mother sat on the faded yellow sofa rocking back and forth. The tears flowed freely down her face as if she were trying to water the flowers on the carpet. Ginny stood by the bookshelf, a newly framed picture of Bobby stared grimly at her. The delivery man handed the box of Bobby's things to Mr. Jones. Feeling the uncomfortable pain of his job, the messenger left the Jones home.

That was a month ago. Ginny had to move on. To heal. Mrs. Jones had given Ginny the shirt with the letter still stuffed in the pocket. Unable to accept the reality of the past month, Ginny had not yet read the letter stuffed in the pocket. A letter she knew was addressed to her. Now Ginny had to put together the pieces of her broken heart, she willed herself to go on. But how?

Ginny told her grandmother to wait. She slowly climbed up the stairs. A short time later, Ginny returned with a box. With reverence, Ginny lifted the lid of the box, and pulled out her prom dress. Lying under the dress was a drab, green shirt.

Bobby's shirt. His shirt with the letter still in the pocket. Unread till this moment. Concern flushed the faces of the older women. Ginny silently lifted the shirt out of the box. She passed her fingers through the holes in the fabric, read the loving lines, and pressed the paper to her heart. Ginny sighed, placed the letter in her pocket, and took the scissors from the sewing basket. She made careful cuts in the shirt. More quickly, she cut squares from her prom dress.

"I want to use this fabric, Granny."



*Phil Keller*  
**MEALTIME**

**F**or a moment I felt as I did at nine years old when I fell from a tree house and had the wind knocked out of me, but the impact of this jolt was far worse. In the midst of my imploding world and through the echo of his disclosure, I thought of how innocently this had all begun.

It had started a mere two days ago, but - oh, what a life-changing couple of days these had been. I sell computer-controlled broadcast systems for small radio and television stations, and traveling from our headquarters in Merced, California, my car had blown its water pump near Burns, Oregon. At dusk as I walked down a road with little traffic, the decreasing temperature made me uneasy. Several miles on foot through the elevated roadway of this forested alpine region made me ever more impatient to find assistance. At one stretch of road, less beset with trees, I could see the lights of a large house seemingly marooned in a great sea of emerald timber. I became intent on finding the entrance to that dwelling. Surely access would be possible from this road, since I could still see clearly enough to realize that there was no other way of gaining entry to such a compound. At last a small, but ornate, portal appeared along the roadside and I turned down the driveway through the woods. At the end of nearly a quarter mile descent, the lane terminated at a grand iron gate. I pushed past the barrier with surprisingly little effort and walked up the massive steps to a pair of large wooden doors. I rang the bell and straight-away a man in formal attire appeared. After explaining my predicament to him, he summoned the owner to hear my plight. Mr. Waterman was very understanding and invited me in to call for help. After speaking with the proprietor of the nearest garage and learning no one could even look at my car until morning, I was invited to have dinner and spend the night in the Waterman home.

I cleaned up in the private bath of a nicely decorated guest room and waited for dinner. Promptly at eight o'clock, just as promised, the butler requested my presence in the dining room. As I passed beneath an impressive archway and began gazing around the exquisitely decorated table, I was confronted by the overwhelming beauty of two dark haired women seated opposite one another. Mr. Waterman introduced his wife, Elena, and daughter, Andrea; save for a few minor alterations they could have been siblings of only a few years apart. We dined on

excellent fare and had a pleasant conversation. They made for most gracious hosts, but I was quite worn out from my day and retired rather early to my room.

My sleep was interrupted by a soft, female voice asking me not to turn on any lights, and to my complete amazement I felt her delicate, naked body slip under the covers with me. I am not married, nor am I necessarily tethered by any moral constraints, but this was outrageous behavior, an obvious offer that I was not going to refuse, however. This woman was so filled with eroticism and abandon that we shared most of the night in passion beyond measure. Then suddenly, just before daylight, my fantasy lover without a word scampered from my room.

At breakfast, as the entire household sat around the table, I looked first at the mother and then at the daughter to gain some hint of confirmation as to who I had made love to the previous night. Neither gave the slightest evidence and offered only polite eye contact. I spent the better part of that morning positioning myself briefly alone with each woman to allow for some acknowledgment, yet none was ever given. There was an eccentric and almost cryptic air to the atmosphere of their residence, yet wealth and refinement were in abundance.

Near lunch time the mechanic phoned to say they had towed my car in for repairs, but it would be another day before the needed part was delivered. When my most amiable hosts heard of this delay they gladly extended the invitation for another day's stay.

I read some, swam in their pool, and walked the grounds of this magnificent estate in the solitude of a forest oasis, wondering all the while which woman had bewitched me. That evening was a repeat of the preceding night. The same demure voice, the same passionate body, the same plea for no lights. In the early dawn, she once again scurried from my arms despite my appeal for her identity.

After yet another unsuccessful bid to gain some indication of who had joined me in bed, I left the breakfast table feeling quite frustrated. The garage was bringing my repaired automobile, and I spent a few moments on the grand veranda of the mansion, thanking Mr. Waterman for his charm and hospitality. He paused for a second as if pondering the wisdom of his next utterance - then asked if I had wondered why they lived in such isolation. I admitted it had crossed my mind. He said that he was a medical doctor and had taken his entire family with him when he went to aid a village along the Congo River in Zaire, Africa. He explained his compassion for the people of a disease-ridden area had blinded him to the dangers for his own household. Through tears he explained Andrea was not their only daughter, and that his first born "angel" had contracted a chronic mutative virus

called *Eboli Mycobacterium*; and now, Comida, just two years older than her sister and the light of his life had a most contagious and ghastly flesh eating virus. He went on to say that Comida had become quite defiant, but he could not bear to send her away to some sanitarium - so the family's decision was to move where care could be given and a quarantine maintained until the affliction took her life.

The doctor must have seen the panic in my eyes, because he added that I certainly had no reason for alarm - Comida concealed herself from virtually everyone and only left her room at night. Without actual physical contact, I had absolutely nothing to fear!



*David Riley*

## **LOST APPEARANCE**

**O**f all the five senses, we live the most through our sight. That is one of the reasons we as a society put so much emphasis on physical appearance. In a world full of mirrors, cameras, and several billion eyes to view us, almost all of us put at least a small amount of time and effort into enhancing our physical appearance. Yet for some of us, nature has altered our appearance, and in my case, that altering was not enhancing.

I am bald. Not by choice, but because my body produces too much testosterone. Testosterone is a steroid hormone responsible for the development of male sex characteristics, and one of the side effects of this condition is male pattern baldness. Although hair covers much of my body, I can grow no hair on top of my head, and I have not been able to since I was in my early 20s. I shave my entire head now because hair will only grow on the sides. My hair is very curly. If I let it grow too long, I end up with what I call The Bozo Effect. In other words, I look like Bozo the Clown. So for the sake of my own personal vanity, I shave my head.

I no longer miss my hair, but I do miss being the person I was when I had long, dark, and curly locks. My hair was my attention getter, and the attention was almost always positive. Now my shining dome attracts just as much attention, but it is for the most part negative. I stand only five-feet and eight-inches tall, but I weigh over 200 pounds. Most of those pounds are muscle, thanks to my hormone condition. My features are not very soft, and my eyes are dark and brooding. I have what soldiers call a thousand-yard stare. I do not smile much, and on my face is usually a look of anger. I am the product of a pretty harsh environment, and it shows. Most people take one look at me and form an opinion that I should be approached with caution, if approached at all. A lot of people look at me and assume that I am a thug or a roughneck. Because of this, few people ever see beyond my appearance to see the real me. Just because my looks are akin to Mike Tyson's does not mean I act like him, and this is something I wish more people could understand.

I never had these worries as a teenager because my appearance then was much softer than now. I had a full head of hair, smoother skin, an athlete's physique, and an attitude that many likened to James Dean. I was a rebel, but handsome enough that no one seemed to care when I took things overboard. For

fighting at school, I was suspended and even arrested. Yet none of this served to dampen my popularity. I had my pick of girlfriends and plenty of mothers trying to fix me up with their daughters. All I had to do was smile and put on a little charm, and no one could see the raging storm that lay just beneath my appearance and charm.

Through the high school years, I lived in a children's home for troubled teens. Most of us were allowed to attend public school, but many chose not to because most of the kids at school treated kids from the children's home as though they were trash. Ironically, I had a difficult time convincing anyone that I was from the home. I was one of the most attractive boys in the school, and my appearance compensated for my being in the children's home. I was invited to all the school's social functions, and even into people's homes who would have nothing to do with the other kids from the children's home. No one ever asked me why I was in that place or where I came from. Even when I got into trouble, everyone would blame it on the fact that I was in the home and that the trash there was rubbing off and affecting my decisions and behavior. I had several families offer to take me into their homes and rescue me from the bad environment that I lived in. I do not know how many times a friend's mother would make a comment such as, "What a handsome young man you are. Where do you live?" Then followed by the words, "You must be kidding! You poor child. You do not look anything like those criminals from the children's home to me."

As I look back now, I find this perplexing because I was in fact the biggest criminal in the home. The titles "thug," "rebel," and "delinquent," fit me like a glove. But they were always dispelled by the titles, "he's so cute!" "he is so fine!" and "he is an angel." Had I been ugly, people would have reacted differently towards me.

True, my looks were a pleasing veneer, but nothing shallow lay below. I had a lot of friends from the children's home, and a lot of the younger kids admired me. I never considered myself different from or better than any of the other kids there. I never participated in the hazing or bashing they were subject to at the hands of the square people—a term we used to describe anyone outside the home. There came a point when I chose not to remain neutral, however, and started taking up for my less fortunate peers whom I lived with. I had a few fights and lost my status as an accepted one among the squares, but I really did not care. I received just as much attention at the home, if not more, than I did at school. The children's home was coed, and I was never one to worry about not having a



girlfriend, an advantage of my natural looks.

Fast forward a few years...

I am sitting in a dark, damp, 6 by 10 foot cell in the Missouri State Penitentiary, in Jefferson City, Missouri. It is my first night, and I am frightened. I have counted no fewer than three rats scurrying across my cell floor. They were even bold enough to stop and glare at me as if I were trespassing on their domain. The smell of urine and rot assaults my whole being. My toilet has overflowed as a result of plumbing that is probable 80 years-old and because the convict in the cell next to mine forgot to yell, "Flush!" The plumbing is so bad that I have to bang on my neighbor's wall and yell, "Flush!" so he can flush his toilet in tandem, or my refuse and waste will come up through his toilet and overflow onto his floor, or vice-versa. Because we are locked down for the night, I cannot clean up the mess. I am forced to use a bath towel to cover my nose and mouth, but the smell of feces and urine are still overpowering. My mood is black, but the rats appear to be enjoying themselves immensely, while I stew in my emotion mixture of anger and fear. Fear because I am still good looking, but I am now in an environment where that is more of a curse than a blessing.

I am 20 years old, my hair is still long, I weigh 135 pounds, and I look more like the artist formerly known as Prince than a typical convict. There are no women to impress here, and no parents to offer me shelter. I am surrounded by the most dangerous men in the state: a collection of murderers, rapists, and thugs, and half of them want me to be their girlfriend. Earlier that evening as I carried my mattress and my belongings to my cell, I was greeted with a chorus of whistles, jeers, and obscenities: "Hey, pretty boy, you're gonna be my punk!" "No he ain't, he's gonna be my bitch!" "Put him in my cell 'cuz I needs me a new hoe!" I did not look at any of the hecklers, but I did not ignore their cat calls either. I was in a very dangerous situation, and the next few days would be a fight for my manhood.

One year later...

I am sitting in the hole, the disciplinary section of the prison where an offender is sent for rules infractions deemed serious enough to warrant segregation from the other convicts. My infraction was that I had assaulted another convict with a baseball bat. He was a large, menacing-looking con, who had a reputation for raping weaker cons. Unfortunately for him, he did not see the storm lurking under my appearance, nor did he pay attention to the fact that he was trying to punk me out on the softball field. I remember him punching me in the mouth. I

remember tasting my own blood. I do not remember picking up the bat, but the sickening sound of his bones breaking still echoes in my mind. The other cons just looked on passively because it was not their fight, but they did convey an occasional nod to me that he had it coming. Prison is a gladiator's arena, and we play by gladiator rules.

I have a mirror in my cell in the hole. I pick it up, and I am taken aback by the stranger I see there. I am not pretty anymore, and my features are no longer soft. My once proud mane of hair is thinning at an astonishing pace. The prison doctor thinks that my hair loss is the result of some illness. He runs some tests, and it is determined that my hair loss is the result of my body producing too much testosterone. After my visit to the doctor, I sit and try to imagine myself being totally bald. As if he were reading my mind, a guard appears at my door and asks me if I want to shave.

It takes me close to a half hour to shave my head. It is a painful process for two reasons: I am accepting the fact that I will never have a full head of hair again, and I cut myself no less than 20 times during the process. I splash cold water over my head, and the sensation, though odd, is not altogether unpleasant. I appraise my new look in the mirror, and I start laughing, while at the same time tears roll down my cheeks. My laughter is maniacal, and "Maniac" is the nickname the other cons give me when I get out of the hole. I wear the moniker proudly, if not fanatically. My transformation is complete as my appearance now matches the storm within.

Thirteen years later...

The door to the Missouri State Penitentiary opens, and it regurgitates the maniac. I came in a good-looking, skinny kid, with long hair; I am leaving as a menacing-looking, muscle-bound, bald opposite of my former self. Within days, I feel like Frankenstein's monster, frightened and frustrated because I cannot seem to fit in. People shy away from me. As I walk down the sidewalk, no one speaks to me. When I speak to them, they lower their eyes and hurry past me. During job interviews, I am always asked if I have ever committed acts of violence, and my lies never seem to be convincing. I finally land a job as a cook in a restaurant, but I am the subject of whispers and stares. Our chef has a reputation for being intimidating and verbally abusive. One day he yells a stream of profanities at me because I overcooked a steak. He is in my face; so close I can smell the garlic on his breath and feel his spittle strike my nose.

As I wipe my face, the storm inside of me threatens to break loose. I stare at

him as I did a certain con so long ago. The veins in my temple throb, and my fingers tighten around the knife that I was using to slice mushrooms prior to the chef's verbal barrage. He senses the storm, and he notices my white knuckled grip on the knife. The look upon his face reminds me of someone who, while at the zoo, threw rocks at the tigers only to lean too far over the barrier and fall in. Everyone holds their breath because they think they know who I am. The violence they expect never comes. I loosen my grip on the knife, and I tell the chef that I am sorry and that I will not mess up again. He seizes the opportunity to walk away, and some of my co-workers look as though they are disappointed that the situation did not explode. They do not know who I am, and their eyes cannot see beyond my exterior.

No one seems to see inside of me, and no one gets close enough to know me. If they did, they would see that the storm is blowing over, and my winter is giving way to spring. They would see a person who has learned to appreciate the smell of a flower and the song of a bird. Who stands in the rain without an umbrella and smiles because there was a time when the rain beat upon only concrete and steel. They would see a lonely soul who longs to recapture a small essence of his teenage years, just so he would not be afraid to ask a woman of culture out, and not feel pangs of loneliness when he sees a couple frolic happily in the park. They would see that I am so desperately trying to be one of them.

It has been almost two years since the incident at the restaurant. I have undergone several changes; I still shave my head, but I have not lifted a weight or worked out since that day. My muscles are turning to fat, and my features are softening. In another year or so, I will be a fat, bald man, and I will have succeeded in transforming myself from a thug to a Drew Carey type. Maybe I will pick his sense of humor and make people laugh? Maybe I will go on the Jenny Jones show for a makeover? Or maybe I will meet a lady who is legally blind, and with her hands she will be able to see what others cannot: that I have 10 fingers and toes, a set of eyes, and a nose-just like everyone else.





*Tessa Rampage*



*Terri Bartels*

## THE HOUSE ACROSS THE STREET

**I**t was a beautiful autumn day in 1993. The afternoon air was cool and crisp. Standing on my front porch, I noticed the sunlight bouncing off the stunning colors of the trees. As I was appreciating the splendors of Mother Nature, the peacefulness of the moment was abruptly shattered. An ambulance pulled into the driveway across the street. Little did I know, my life was about to change forever.

The neighbors across the street were an elderly couple. They were both in their 80s. They had lived in their house for 50 years. I had lived in my house for 15 years. Although we lived so close to one another, we never socialized. We led our own lives and kept to ourselves. The man of the house was named Les. When our paths crossed, we greeted one another with a quick hello or a nod of the head. In 15 years, I had never met the lady of the house. Actually, I never even saw her. When my children were growing up, they often questioned if Les' wife really existed. She was the mystery woman that the whole neighborhood whispered and wondered about. Then, one day it happened. I saw the mystery woman. Unfortunately, she was being loaded into an ambulance that rushed her away.

Her husband did not go with her in the ambulance. From my front window, I watched him. It was as if time stood still. He just remained in one spot and kept looking around, as if he were in a daze. Realizing that he was in shock, I decided to go over and help him. I gently put my hand on his shoulder and said, "Les, are you okay?" The sound of my voice somehow snapped him back to reality. He explained that his wife could not walk, and he was too weak to help her. I told him I would take him to the hospital, and that is when he remembered that he had to go be with his wife. He went in the house and called his son. His son arrived shortly thereafter and took him to the hospital.

Within a couple of days, Les' wife was home. I decided to go over and see if they needed anything. He invited me in and introduced me to his wife. Her name was Gertrude, but everyone called her Gert. She was a normal looking, sweet, little old lady. They seemed to enjoy having company, so I stayed for about an hour. During our visit, I noticed that Les' health was worse than his wife's. He was hooked up to an oxygen machine. I gave them my telephone number and told them to call me if they needed anything. When I went home that night, I thought



about how awful it must feel to get old and be in poor health. That night I felt very young, and very afraid of growing old. I did not sleep well.

Autumn turned to winter, and life went on. Things went back to normal in the neighborhood. We rarely saw each other, just like all those years gone by. They never called me, so I assumed that everything was in order. Something was different. When I looked at their house, I felt a twinge of something. I could not put my finger on exactly what it was. It was an uncomfortable feeling, so I tried to put it out of my mind. This was hard to do, because I saw their house everyday.

Two weeks before Christmas, my telephone rang. It was Gert. When I heard her voice, my thoughts began to race. Receiving a call from Gert alarmed me. She wanted my husband to get her something, but I could not understand what she was saying. I told her that Scott would be right over. We were both afraid something was terribly wrong. Scott ran across the street. The 10 minutes he was gone seemed like an hour. He came home smiling, and told me that Gert wanted him to buy her a bottle of Kahlua. She informed him that she liked to be able to make her son a cocktail during the holiday season. She also mentioned that her husband was in the hospital. I am positive that is why Gert really called. She was alone and afraid.

A few days went by, and there was a knock at my door. I opened it and there was Les and Gert's son, Bill. He looked nervous. Bill explained how he had been extremely busy going to work and the hospital to see his father everyday. He told me he had found his mother sick in bed and wanted to know if I could come over and help him with her. I was glad to help; however, I did not know what he needed me for. I went to his mother's house with him, and I knew immediately why he needed me. As I went into Gert's bedroom, the smell almost knocked me over. It was the kind of a smell that makes a person take a step backwards. I do not know how long poor Gert had been bedridden, but she had soiled herself several times. Bill needed my help to clean his mother up. I think he was too embarrassed to do it himself. So I did it.

From that day on, I went to Gert's house everyday. I would feed her dog and take him outside. I would make Gert something to eat. Gert and I would talk, laugh, and cry together. She told me many wonderful stories about our neighborhood and her life. In the evenings, I would put Gert to bed, wait for her to fall asleep, lock up the house, and go home. It was a lonely time in my life also. I had raised two children, and they were both on their own now. I was experiencing the empty-nest syndrome. Gert made me feel useful again. We became great

friends. Little by little, her health improved. I knew why Gert had become ill. She was missing her husband, and she was alone. We both knew that her husband was never coming home, but that remained unspoken. We did not need the words; the fear in her eyes said it all.

One day, Gert told me that Les had been transferred from the hospital to Red Oaks Nursing Home. That only meant one thing. I called their son, and he confirmed my suspicions. I asked Gert if she was going to go see her husband. She told me that she wanted to, but her son did not think it was a good idea. That day, Gert and I had a very delicate conversation. I could not come out and say, "Would you like to go visit Les before he dies?" Yet, I had to let her know that time was an issue. This man had been her husband for over 50 years, and she had the right to see him. On a very cold and bitter winter day, I took Gert to the nursing home. She was too proud to have her husband see her in a wheel chair, so Gert walked the long walk to her husband's room. We both knew this would be the last time she saw her husband alive. The day was as emotional as it was necessary. Gert got to say her final goodbye.

Les died the next day. I often wonder if he was just holding on until he could see his beloved one last time. I think he did just that. The day Les was buried; I went across the street and got Gert dressed for her husband's funeral. It was a hard thing to do, but that is what friends are for.

Looking back, I wonder if Gert needed me as much as I needed her. It was a lonely time for both of us. We filled a void in each other's lives and helped each other through difficult times. It's as if our friendship was meant to be. We learned a great number of things from one another, but the most important thing we learned was that age does not matter when it comes to friendship. Gert passed away two years ago, and I miss my friend dearly. When I look across the street now, I do not feel uncomfortable. I feel blessed to have known and loved the mystery woman.





*Tessa Rampage*



*Janet Lee Lanning*  
**LUHR COUNTY PARK**

**I**'ve always thought of Luhr County Park as an escape from the problems and stresses in my everyday life. The trees, in their beauty and peaceful tranquillity, soothe me when I'm overwrought with the daily rituals of being a student, homemaker, partner, and mother.

As I drove to Luhr Park on this beautiful fall day, I was filled with the anticipation of a sedate stroll in my favorite place. Upon arriving at the park, it looked peaceful and inviting as always. I had brought along my 13-year-old son, Joe, and his best friend Will. The boys hit the pavement running as I pulled into the half-full parking lot. "We're off to get lost in the woods, OK, Mom?" I laughed at their youthful exuberance. "Don't fall out of any trees, boys."

Taking only my pen and paper, I started down Hickory Hollow Trail at the entrance to the woods off the parking lot. The wind was blowing gently through my hair, and the sun was pouring warmly over my bare arms. On my left, I saw the Nature Center. The rugged brown sides of the building seemed to blend in with the woods instead of intruding upon the natural scene. On my right was a large clearing. There were 16 weather-beaten, gray picnic tables placed in a semicircle around the outer edges of the clearing. I was reminded of the first Pioneer Girls Club camping trip I went on at age 11. It was a warm July weekend, and all the girls gathered in a semicircle after dinner for singing and devotions. That was the last year I remember the innocence of childhood.

Unlike that sweet summer meadow in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, Luhr Park meadow was filled with the stunning colors of autumn. The leaves in the trees were varying shades of yellows, reds, and greens, all vibrant against the blue sky. The bright colors and brisk breeze rekindled the excitement I always get in the fall: the pumpkins and squash from my neighbor's garden waiting to be baked, the apple and spice scent of my favorite candles for my fall centerpiece, and hot apple cider garnished with cinnamon sticks to warm an early autumn morning.

As I resumed my walk down Hickory Hollow Trail, I noticed a woodchipped trail I had not been on before. Hoping to see some wildlife, I started down the trail. After walking just a short distance, I started feeling a growing sense of panic. I was starting to feel claustrophobic. The trees that had been beautiful old friends just moments before were now closing in on me, throwing hickory nuts and

dead leaves all around me. The wind that had been so warm and gentle was now rushing through the trees, mocking my fright. All around me, I imagined some sinister stranger stalking me. My heart was beating wildly in my chest, and I felt as if I could hardly breathe. I had my first claustrophobic panic attack when I was playing blind man's bluff at the age of five. The blindfold blocking out my familiar surroundings terrified me. Here in the woods, I was having the same feelings, and unable to gain control of my emotions, I quickly retraced my steps back to the main trail and sat down on one of the many wooden benches to regain my inner balance.

Soon, my breathing was normal, and I could hear children laughing delightedly at the choices of trails they had to ride their bikes on. The two young children rounded the bend into my view along with their parents. All four seemed to be having a great time, and I could remember how much Joe and I used to enjoy riding the Platte River trail behind our house in Denver when Joe was much younger. We had more time together then, before divorce, moving, and school fragmented our time.

Feeling whole, I started back down the main trail. The trees again became my friends. The air smelled of pine trees, and I looked down at my feet to see many pine needles along the trail. They reminded me of the Christmas season to come. There were red-berried bushes mingling among the tall trees, the berries a bright contrast against the green, gold, and russet colored leaves. Many of the trees had vines climbing sinuously around their trunks and through their branches. Birds could be heard over the rustling leaves, and the squirrels kept up an endless chatter that reminded me of a walk through crowded Chinatown in New York, with so many people speaking in a fast, unknown language while shopping at the vending tables along the streets.

Arriving at the Wetland Ecosystem, I could see Joe and Will playing in the trees. Undetected, I watched the boys playing make-believe jousting with broken tree branches. It was wonderful to see that my six-foot tall, teenage son could still enjoy climbing in the trees and playing in the woods like a little boy. The boys and I climbed to the top of the lookout tower, seeing the cattails and reeds around the ponds. I could hear, but not see, the many frogs croaking around me. My friend Terry told me that he had once shot a frog and would never do it again because of the terrible scream it made when shot.

As I headed back to the parking lot, I passed the fishing pond. Sitting at a picnic table was a young woman pushing a baby stroller back and forth with her



foot. A few feet away, her husband was playing with a young puppy at the water's edge. The puppy was barking and biting at the waves as they rolled over his paws. A short way around the pond was a young tow-headed boy taking fishing instructions from his older brother while Grandma watched from the pavilion. I was happy to see so many people out enjoying this beautiful autumn day in this tree-covered place with no televisions, computers, or phones.

My serenity restored by the beauty of the trees, I reluctantly left the park to return to my studies and afternoon of domestic chores, knowing that I will again be able to recapture the peaceful tranquillity at Luhr Park.

*Nancy C. Howell*  
**LITTLE PAPERS**

**I**t wasn't the first instance, but it was rare, so he had startled most of the congregation with his striking the pulpit. He lowered his hand to his side to hide the clenching movement in his robes. He prayed for less anger, even though he knew that anger delivers a kind of truth with its appearance, an adrenaline that shores up despair with hope. He prayed for a spiritual guidance, needing to come to an understanding of his mother. Already knowing that what he was seeking might put his faith in abeyance, that it might repel him from the God he had come to revere, he hoped for a marriage of two entities, his devout faith in God and an absolution of the mystery in which he placed the two persons whom he revered most after his father and God, his mother and his mentor.

This need had slowly grown over the years and though it was usually soothed by the rapport that he had with the people that he now faced, the need had festered. He often felt that ignorance would be better than what he carried in him, a fantasy more focused with age. When its reality broke over the deck of reason, he had always battened it down with a hatch of self-righteousness. He felt that it would hold great significance if the vague passion that he had felt in his childhood could be used to generate in him a good given for others. It would be better to think of his mother and his mentor as two ordinary beings doing the best that they could for themselves. But he was never satisfied with that thought. He had always received so much from his mother and the man he called Uncle John. Because of their combined influence he had ever expected more, yet there was a constant nudging under his surface, a truth that always seemed to elude him, sometimes raging, like the surprise shard in a cat's paw.

He brought his trembling hand up to touch the worn wood of the pulpit, considering it an almost palpable repository for all the words that had been spoken in its presence. He had left a comfortable life in the city, choosing to live in this small village in an attempt to guide his thoughts to a proper direction. His anger had often vented itself, however, to be laid out at his worst and his best moments, either randomly on scraps of paper or in his sermons, both commitments heaving honesty at him that sometimes frightened him. Yet his spirit was continuously renewed at each mass when he viewed the congregation from the main entrance of the church.

He never entered the sanctuary from the sacristy, leaving the acolyte to enter alone. He would dress reverently, choosing from the stores of robes in the sacristy but would leave there through a small door to the outside. This enabled him to enter through the front door of the church, as the parishioners did. He treasured his first steps into the nave, admiring the vulnerable quality of faceless people, slowing his pace to enjoy them in a very catholic way. He admired them as faceless for a time, without seeing the eyes that on occasion held defiance for a God that allowed nature to thrust so much hardship upon them through drought, illness, or the rare but very painful confessions of infidelity that he had encountered. He wondered if his eyes were sometimes like theirs.

The endurance of living through others enfolded in his care had never seemed more real to him than when he had come to tend to this small village. He felt a closer bond to these people. Their faces were open, as open as the fields wherein they worked. Those that he had instructed in the city were trammelled by appearances. The challenge was much greater here because of the simple openness, an honesty that showed in their lack of fine clothes, their worn clothes reflecting the furrows of hard work.

He brought his eyes up from his study of the pulpit and allowed himself to look into his wife's face. She sat in the closest pew and near the aisle. She seemed in a haze, as she seemed during many of his sermons, not only in his vision of her but as he imagined her perception of him. She had once told him that his writing carried her to another place. He valued this connection with her, for that is how he felt when he wrote.

Her hand caressed the wood that supported the end of the pew in which she sat. She was thinking of the genuine struggle of each parishioner as they slowly genuflected, lowering their bodies down and then drawing them back up and supporting themselves on this piece of wood that looked like a tombstone. She had teased her husband, saying that each person sitting in the pews should have their names etched onto the end piece. She had said that they all died a little death each Sunday with his fine sermons sounding in their ears.

He had smiled and held her hands, drawing both to his face. He didn't laugh often. He was usually surrounded by written papers when he was not out in the fields of their makings. In spite of, or because of, his writing, he and his wife both gathered a warmth from each other, bracing themselves against the hardships of the villagers and sharing in the subtle joys that encompass those who draw strength from the land around them. On the larger Sunday gatherings, he imagined

everyone in the nave cloistered into a growth, a vine, binding each to the other to become a wreath.

He bent his head to the papered sermon, and his eye began to plot the texture and color of the wooden pulpit. He began to think of his father. He still spoke to his parish, but his eyes saw the hands of his father tracing animals in the wood of the bedroom door.

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"Father, does a cat always have the same shape?"

"Yes, but I heard that some cats are very big in other parts of the world."

"Do they eat birds there too?"

"Well, surely not the little ones we have in this part of the world."

"An ostrich is big, isn't it father?"

"So they say, and they draw it with a long neck. Here is one—here."

"Is God always the same shape father?"

" . . . I used to believe so . . ."

His father had named the animals, as Adam had in the Bible. He remembers that as a little boy he had sensed an immense power and had wondered at his mother's power too. Her name had been Magdelan, and until he had become a young man he had been angered that she hadn't exhibited the same power as the other Magdelan had at Christ's resurrection, for she had witnessed His leaving the tomb. He had expected his mother to become part of a miracle after the funeral to resurrect his own father when he died. He had been too young to realize that his father wasn't Christ.

He gently shook his head of the vision, and began to speak more slowly. He wanted the sermon to serve as the beginning of the week for the villagers and thought of the necessity of closure in a structure of words, because this moment was euphoric, yet difficult. It was meant to be a beginning for his parishioners and the end of some struggle for himself.

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Uncle John's long black coat smelled of rain, for it had shouldered the afternoon storm. It dripped onto the wood veins of the floor, and the drops picked up a sun color from the window. Mother's voice was soft, but it became almost



hushed during his visits. Her voice held the kind of sound as when she sheltered a stunned bird in her hand or when she would whisper above the round face of a baby. He heard this voice faintly down the hall. His mother must have been standing near the fireplace, not yet lit in that room because it was usually used in the late of evening. There was a muted echo to the voice as if she were speaking into the rectangle above the hearth. Perhaps his mother was leaning on the mantle with both of her hands, as he had seen her do when he would suddenly run into the room and she would turn to him, her mouth starting into a smile, her eyes slowly following from some other place. This always thrilled him, making him believe that he had stumbled into another world. It was the same world that he felt when he neared their house, walking through the dark of its thicket and seeing the entrance in all the shadows of light. It was the same world as when he had fallen off his horse, rendering him breathless and beyond the control of the earth. And it felt like what he had experienced one morning when he had read some writing found in the pocket of the black coat in the hall, writing on papers that spoke of sun and a clearness found by separate persons in each other, connecting them in some strange way. He hadn't understood what was written, but he had inherently grasped the strength of the words and an interposition of truth. He had found them more than once and had trembled at the sound of them, when he had given them a voice.

The sound of two voices belled out to the hall, seeming to move the drops of water strung from the hem of the coat that now shouldered the warmth of the sun. The drops shuddered when he suddenly sat to watch them become smaller, the late afternoon sun giving them an energy and slowly taking it at the same time. He considered how words seemed sung by voices when given to deep thought. He had that feeling when he heard the hymns in church. He listened to the song until he realized that his mother was no longer a part of it. Uncle John had taken over in some halting cadence, a sound foreign to the mood that the boy had gathered around him.

A latch fell and the quick look he had of his mother in the end room had made it seem a useless breath to speak. She was looking at her hands, as if she had been grasping something for a long time and was not yet ready to give it freedom.

The water under the coat had either dried or had harmlessly entered the wood floor. The coat brushed the dark hair on the boy's head, dampening it slightly before being slung over Uncle John's shoulders; they said nothing to each other as he opened the door and then shut it. The boy stared at the floor, wishing that the

coat pockets hadn't been empty.

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It had been a good morning, yet he turned from the last good will of a handshake thankful not to have to see any more eyes. He needed to concentrate his energies on this afternoon and the next. He started a fast stride to the modest rectory, with the fleeting thought of writing a private sermon on the life of Mary Magdalan, the fallen woman who becomes the female disciple of Jesus. The wedding ceremony was tomorrow afternoon, and the sermon was only a brief thought, for he was vaguely angry that his sensibilities should feel so threatened.

With that threat, he felt a fleeting, yet astonishing dislike for the morals and the doctrines of which he had been taught to uphold. He didn't want to punish; the young woman to be married would never see or hear the sermon, and the whole village would be witness to what was traditionally frowned upon. The young couple would have enough to do to win over the hearts of their respective families. And despite his obligations, he had to admit to himself that the writing he wanted to do today was for himself.

He found it necessary; for having married many persons to each other, he had never before performed a ceremony in which three would stand before God and his knowing public. He wondered if the vows of the parents would be sensed from the womb. He looked out the window and considered the afternoon spaces of light caught in the frame. He thought of how when paper frames writing it might be considered a vow, especially when it was a poem.

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In the days when Uncle John no longer came to the house, he had found his mother engaged in more and more reading. He wondered if she was reading any of the sharings left by Uncle John, whose presence was now demanded by larger writings that served large crowds. He said that he had been called upon. He had heard his mother say that. He thought that his mother should read the papers to him and not keep them to herself.

Once he had rivalled himself in being so quiet as to hear a soft intake of breath. His mother had been intent on little papers in her lap. And her smile had been sudden, as the wind bursting the white of a dandelion. At that moment she

had seemed to be someone other than his mother. It had been afternoon, and she had seemed to outshine the sun clamoring through the west window where she read. And he had felt something in the room, closing around his slight body to thaw his muscles frozen from hiding. He felt warmer somehow as he watched her lips move, warmer—as a thin robe might keep one warm for a time.

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He sat in his short space of solitude in the rectory, his thoughts drifting from the couple and their lot, and soon he began to marvel at the movement of a woman. Men, as men, can learn the movements of grace, but it seemed as if women were granted that special condition by God, fluidity like that of a gentle stream. When he had learned how this earth was peopled, he had studied the movement of his mother inside her clothing. And he had watched his wife's movements when she attended to others and rejoiced in her movements when she ultimately attended to him.

He pondered upon a spring afternoon of last year, when the quick of a womb lay dead in its water. His cassock had become soaked as he leaned onto the bed to touch the baby's head with blessing water poured from the shell of an oyster. He had thought of how graceful the child would have become because of the little womb enclosed within her own body. He had spoken the rites of the dead and then closed the book to stare down for a long time, thinking of how brave a woman must be to learn that some miracles are born only as dreams to be recounted in the cleansing of tears.

That evening he had walked to the woods trying to recount the events of the afternoon in a poem and had felt low at his efforts. He now tried again, forgetting about the sermon of Mary Magdalen, while he attempted to twin both babies, gone and begun, into one memory. Into the fourth stanza he heard soft knocking. The couple had arrived early, but he didn't mind. He stood and asked them to enter the room. The boy came in first, giving his arm to the girl, and then guiding her hand through the crook of it.

They were both of the same height but her body was larger. After speaking a greeting, they looked straight into one another, gathering knowledge from each for the other. The priest sensed a profound courage and realized that they were married already, not bound by the obviousness of their union but by a fusing of radiance, the kind that confounds the hardest of souls and strengthens the weakest



of them in its struggling expression. And finally, in this presence, he felt a lifting of what had long plagued him.

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It is a display of disobedience to be here at this hour, standing outside this door. It is his mother's private place. And he knows she has wished it so, but he just had the dream again of his father shaping the animals in the wood of the door and of his telling about Adam and he has dreamed his father's strong hands into that work and so sees his father kneeling, and a greater need for his father overcomes the fear of displeasing his mother so that he forgets her wish and heaves his small shoulder upon the heavy wood.

It is a large room with a great window, where his mother stands looking at her hands, before she turns to face the night, spreading her arms across the window sill to balance her body, so that she can lift her head up to look out. His father had once told him about something called stigmata, and he feels this energy in the room. He wants to run and touch her palms, before she smiles and cups them around his face, but he questions his voice when an arm moves out from her bed and draws her from the window. All the light from the moon rushes in to shine upon the floor of the room. He begins to breathe through them.

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And he expels that breath, as he gazes at the couple before him, rejoicing in what fleshes or pales as shapes begun or gone. The light in his mother's room has become the door to a place where fortune allows those to experience the dignity of flesh and spirit, born from that ever silent discussion of what humans can be. He looks down at the paper on his desk and recognizes the truth that he had felt as a boy, while reading the poems he had found in the pockets of a coat that now settles upon his shoulders.





*Julia A. Nielsen*



*Danny Farrell*

*Nancy C. Howell*

## **MAY**

A seagull, spent from winter,  
Spolges his shadow on the water,  
The foam of which shimmers like  
The bergs that often stumble upon

The shores of March. Walking  
Through the broken halves of ice  
Anyone could have seen the gull  
Awry at the neck, the eyes gone,

Rolling on the nether-sand, or  
In the mouth of some swimmer.  
But the ice had prepared the gull  
For torping-each grey feather had

Had hardened into a shining scale.  
It was, then, that I had thought of  
St. Thomas and of splitting the ice  
And slitting the abdomen to tuck

Each tarsus and its webbed talon  
Right up inside the body to serve  
As the guts of a new fish. Yet,  
Even before the head had begun

To turn toward me and the beak  
To flatten and round on its own,  
I had already begun to dread  
Summer, for seagulls announce

A storm, as if they know  
How long a fish  
Will bite at a raindrop.





**REFLECTIONS ON SOCIETY:  
RACE, GENDER, AND SOCIAL ISSUES**

*Elaine V. Gee*

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## THE HIV/AIDS CRISIS OF LESBIANS AND OTHER WOMEN

**H**IV, the virus that causes AIDS, is not just a gay man's disease. This has been a misconception since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. Many fundamentalist/conservative/family values groups contend that HIV is the product of the gay lifestyle and God's wrath on homosexuals (Salyer 1991). The following statistics provided by the World Health Organization and the Center for Disease Control show a different picture. Worldwide, 16,000 people are infected with HIV daily; the United States infection rates have held steady at 40,000 per year but data suggest rates are on the rise. Not all of those infected are gay men. African-American and Hispanic women combined represent less than one quarter of the total U.S. population yet account for more than three-quarters of the AIDS cases in this country. By the year 2000, 14 million women will have been infected and four million will have died (UNAIDS 1999).

Of the 14 million women infected, how many are lesbians? Lesbians have long been categorized as a low-risk population (Russell and Sanford 1998). Perhaps this fallacy is perpetuated because research considers risks in terms of behavior instead of demographics. Risk of HIV infection depends on not who the person is, but rather what the person does. The research information available pertaining specifically to lesbians is practically non-existent. For statistical purposes, lesbians have been combined with the overall category of women or categorized as "other." This lack of research and information dangerously leads to a false sense of safety for lesbians and limits intelligent choices about risks. Whether one is straight, bisexual, lesbian, or gay, the risk is real to all people.

Many factors have contributed to the increased number of women being infected with HIV. These include transmission and risk factors, treatment issues, gender differences, gender bias, and prevention issues. This paper will address HIV, women in general, and more specifically, HIV and lesbians.

Russell and Sanford (1998) explain that the transmission of the HIV virus is dependent on two conditions. The virus must be present at a sufficient level in at least one of the people involved and the virus must get into the bloodstream. Bodily fluids such as semen, blood, vaginal secretions and breast milk in an HIV

positive person carry sufficient quantities of the virus to cause infection. Other body fluids of an HIV positive person such as saliva, tears, sweat, urine, feces and vomit do not carry sufficient amount of the virus to cause infection unless they contain blood.

The HIV virus can enter the bloodstream through mucous membranes of the vagina, rectum, eyes, nose and inside the penis, or through open wounds, cuts or scratches and via needles. Women are at a higher risk if they engage in unprotected sex, have sexually transmitted diseases, or untreated vaginal disease. With these conditions, the virus can enter the mucous membranes more easily (Russell & Sanford 1998).

When the previously discussed conditions are present, the virus can be transmitted in the following ways: 1) sharing needles for intravenous drugs such as heroin, cocaine or speed, or needles shared for tattooing and body piercing, 2) vaginal or anal sex, and other sexual activities such as fisting or sharing unclean sex toys, 3) receiving a transfusion of infected blood, 4) receiving infected semen through donor insemination, and 5) to infants through pregnancy, childbirth and breast-feeding (Russell and Sanford 1998). These modes of HIV transmission place all people at risk, male or female, heterosexual or homosexual.

Specific information pertaining to lesbian transmission of HIV is minimal and mostly undocumented. Perhaps the lack of research, the research methods used and the categorizing of women having sex with women are at fault. The biological risk of female-to-female transmission is not known (MacNeil 1995). Since HIV may be contracted from cunnilingus, what exactly is the mode of transmission? It has never been scientifically studied. From the beginning of the AIDS epidemic until today, the government arbitrarily decided that lesbians were in a no risk to low risk group. The low risk category is not based on scientific fact. The lowest risk category was defined by the assumptions of men as to women's sexual realities.

Because lesbians are considered a low risk category, research in how the disease is transmitted from woman to woman is unclear. "However, studies have shown that the prevalence of female-to-female sex among HIV-infected or at risk women is not insignificant" (JAMA HIV/AIDS Information Center, 1998, p. 29). Most of these studies were designed specifically to focus on behaviors related to established HIV transmission modes, thus rendering lesbians indistinguishable from the rest of the population.

In 1993, two cases of lesbian patients infected with HIV through sex with women were documented by Dr. David Wright of Austin, Texas (Lucey 1993). The



women had no other known risk factors. In the past these cases have been dismissed as isolated incidents, perpetuating the myth that lesbians are safe from AIDS. There is no category box for lesbian on the state devised anonymous test form. Lesbians are forced to check the infamous "other" box which includes everything else besides gay sex and intravenous drug use with shared needles. Therefore, these women are immediately placed into the IV drug-using category or the catch all category of other. If a woman has multiple risk factor behaviors, no one tries to isolate the exact cause of infection.

The information presented displays the government's lack of interest concerning lesbian HIV risks and transmission. Because of the multiple risk factors of drug use and sex with men, the conclusion is that the virus is transmitted by this behavior, not by women having sex with other women. Therefore, the missing link is exactly how the virus is transmitted, not why.

The different ways HIV manifests itself in women compared to men complicates the picture for all women. The Third National conference on Women and HIV held in Pasadena, California, on June 11, 1997, presented data suggesting that HIV makes its initial appearance differently in men and women. "In men, the pattern is predominately of a single HIV that appears in a newly infected individual: however, in newly infected women, there appears to be a very heterogeneous virus, suggesting that transmission across the female genital mucosa is quite different from that across the male genital mucosa" (JAMA HIV/AIDS Information Center, 1997, p. 3).

Women are biologically more vulnerable than men to HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases (UNAIDS 1999). Other data suggests that STDs, especially those such as chancroid and syphilis, which cause ulcerative lesions, greatly facilitate both the acquisition and transmission of HIV. The HIV infection frequently manifests itself with the emergence of STDs and other gynecological conditions. HIV positive women often have chronic vaginitis, pelvic infections, vaginal and cervical diseases or bacterial lung infections (Russell and Sanford 1998). There is a high incidence of human papillomavirus (HPV), which causes cell changes that can lead to cervical cancer. Two other gynecological conditions that may be complicated by HIV infection are pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) and vulvovaginal candidiasis. Women who are immunocompromised are at increased risk for these conditions and may be particularly at higher risk for severe forms of the disorders (JAMA HIV/AIDS Information Center 1997).

For those seeking treatment, lesbians and other women deal with various obstacles, compared to men. Medical treatment is available in the form of



antiretroviral drugs such as AZT or ZVD, 3TC, ddI, and d4T (Russell and Sanford 1998). These act at a certain stage of the viral replication preventing the virus from reproducing any further and infecting new cells. These drugs do not work on already infected cells. There are now drug combinations, HIV cocktails, which usually combine two antiretroviral drugs and one protease inhibitor so that the virus will not become drug-resistant as easily. Although the advent of protease inhibitors has been a turning point in the effort to treat HIV infection and AIDS, knowledge of the drugs' greatest impact has involved use in white men (JAMA HIV/AIDS Information Center 1997).

Women's response to drug therapy is an area where the least amount of information is available (MacNeil 1997). Too few women are enrolled in most clinical trials to be able to discern important gender-related differences. The government-funded research effort systematically omits women by design, based mostly on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Statistically significant numbers of women will never be enrolled in these research projects without aggressive pressure to redesign the system to include women. Exclusion from research efforts is but one obstacle faced by women.

Other issues for lesbians and other women include access to care, threats to family security, domestic violence and lack of social services (MacNeil 1997). Culturally, women are still taught to put others' well being before their own (Russell and Sanford 1998). Family responsibilities are expected, and often do take precedence over personal health care. There is more focus on women as infectors of children and men than as people deserving of prevention and treatment. Women on the average make less money than men. Too often, public support for the means to fight HIV/AIDS effects on women is lacking: drug treatment programs, housing, adequate nutrition, jobs with health insurance and childcare. Unequal male-female power relationships interfere with using protection in sex. Even when force is not present, women are often unwilling to bring up the issue of safer sex for fear of being hurt or abandoned.

In addition to these issues, lesbians are confronted by other problems. Many health-care providers have negative attitudes toward lesbians that make them more reluctant to seek care (Russell and Sanford 1998). Lesbians may delay going for gynecological care if they are not having children or needing birth control. Some providers are ignorant about HIV risk factors for lesbians and may fail to caution about risky behaviors or explore possible symptoms.

Presumptions of heterosexuality prevail, rendering health-care services for

women of varying sexual and gender identities insignificant and non-responsive (Weiser, Cheek, Morris, Starling, & Flinn 1997). Issues of homophobia, racism, and other sociopolitical factors in conjunction with male-biased research data and the lack of funding further contribute. The result is a vicious cycle that ultimately perpetuates the invisibility of half the population.

HIV/AIDS is a non-discriminating reality. AIDS has become the third leading cause of death among women in the 25- to 45-year-old age group, and ranks first as cause of death among African-American women in that group (JAMA HIV/AIDS Information Center 1997). Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1999) report the following number of cases in adult/adolescent women in the United States: White not Hispanic, 24,456; Black not Hispanic, 61,874; Hispanic, 21,937; Asian/Pacific Islander, 564; and American Indian/Alaska Native, 310.

"Women worldwide are asking why a virus that infects both men and women is increasingly affecting women in a disproportionate manner" (UNAIDS, 1999, 1). The alarming statistics alert women to the need for preventative measures. Some measures of female-controlled prevention include the female condom and vaginal microbicides (JAMA HIV/AIDS Information Center 1997). Women who are vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases desperately need a viable option, and the female condom offers such an option. Various microbicides designed to be inserted vaginally in the form of gels or foam may kill the virus on contact and decrease the risk of heterosexual transmission. Male resistance to condom use and women's inability to negotiate safer sex puts both men and women at greater risk of infection (UNAIDS 1999).

Lesbians and other women can take control of preventing HIV by knowing their own and their partner's HIV status (Center for Disease Control 1997). This knowledge can help women initiate and sustain behavioral changes that reduce their risk. Women should be aware of appropriate barrier methods for different sexual activities. "No barrier methods for use during oral sex has been approved by the Food and Drug Administration; however, women can use dental dams, cut-open condoms, or plastic wrap to protect themselves from contact with body fluids during oral sex" (Center for Disease Control, 1997, 2).

Russell and Sanford (1998) state:

For women, safer sex is about power: power to feel worthwhile, having enough self-esteem to want to protect ourselves. Power to hold our ground and persuade a sex partner to use protection. Power to support our

children and ourselves financially if we leave a partner who won't use protection. Power to feel proud of our sexuality, and to speak openly about sex, even when it is hard to talk about. Drugs and alcohol weaken our power to protect ourselves: if we are addicted, the power we need depends on access to affordable treatment. All women deserve the power to keep ourselves and our loved ones healthy (366).

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*Nancy C. Howell*

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**“THE FOLLOWING MAY CONTAIN  
SCENES UNSUITABLE  
FOR THE MORE SENSITIVE VIEWER”  
(The World at War)**

Each of the lenses glisten  
In the mass of eyeglasses  
Accusing those liberators,  
Who dare to use handkerchiefs

And as bones would choke  
The ovens, the false teeth  
Are proleptic in that mound.  
The sun makes an accusation

When the camera plunges  
Barbed wire, challenging  
Anyone to make a cloth  
Worthy of covering the

Silvery bodies caught by  
The words of a Goebbels  
And the cup of a bulldozer.  
As Faustus would beg to hide

Water drops, his kinsmen  
Are hunted everywhere,  
And the judges at Nuremberg  
Find a flesh that pays rent to bone.

The Nazis speak-  
But say nothing; and  
There is a gleaming-  
But they have no eyes.

*Lesla M. Cotto*

# **PROMOTING RACIAL PROGRESS: THE DIFFERING VIEWS OF W. E. B. DU BOIS AND MALCOLM X**

*“The Negro Race, like all races, is going to be  
saved by its exceptional men.”*

*W. E. B. Du Bois*

**A**frican-American culture has been favored by many influential thinkers in the past century. Men like Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X have contributed ideas to the ever-growing canon of African-American thought. A debate, however, has been increasing between conservative and liberal viewpoints among these thinkers. Educators and leaders in the civil rights movement have debated whether African-Americans should work together with white leaders to bring about social change, or if African-Americans should work towards a better social condition within their own culture: free from oppression and racial tension. This paper will focus on the views of two distinguished liberals in African-American culture: W. E. B. Du Bois and Malcolm X. By presenting the development of liberal thought, through an examination of Du Bois, one can perceive the unfolding of the rhetoric of the civil rights movement as modeled by Malcolm X.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois laid the groundwork for African-American liberal thought in the early half of the twentieth century. Du Bois has been called the “Renaissance man of African American letters,” and it is clear that he has inspired African-Americans to be proud of their heritage (Gates and McKay 606). At an early age, Du Bois wrote in his journal his life time goal “to make a name in science, to make a name in art and thus to raise my race” (Gates and McKay 606). This worthy goal motivated Du Bois to pursue his academic career. As a professor in the South, Du Bois witnessed the cruelty that African-Americans lived with on a daily basis (Gates and McKay 607). The oppression of blacks in the South fostered a growing liberalism in Du Bois.

Du Bois was a man with strong opinions, and he was motivated to action by a desire to improve the condition of his race. Du Bois held that socialism would help



to promote economic equality (Gates and McKay 606). According to the *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, "The Depression of the 1930's confirmed in Du Bois's mind the need for fundamental socioeconomic change in America according to Marxist principles" (Gates and McKay 608). Du Bois's liberal leanings led to his dismissal from the NAACP and his departure from Atlanta University (Gates and McKay 608). In 1951, the government indicted Du Bois and his colleagues as "subversive agents of a foreign power" (Gates and McKay 608).

Social Darwinism was the prevailing social theory of Du Bois's time, and the hereditarian research program was established to corroborate the legitimacy of social Darwinism. The idea that the African race was "inferior" to the Anglo race was demonstrated by the division of Africa among white peoples: "Between 1859 (when Charles Darwin's *Origins of the Species* was published) and the Boer War of 1902, white Western men conquered, explored, fought over and partitioned among themselves all of Africa south of the Sahara desert" (Monteiro 1). While social Darwinism did not support racism, the exploitation of "lower" classes was the immediate result of this philosophy. The work of Du Bois actively questions the official position of science during his generation.

It was while he was working at the University of Atlanta that Du Bois developed his most famous literary work. *The Souls of Black Folk* is an effort by Du Bois to preserve the heritage of African-Americans. The work integrates the spiritual, educational, and artistic life of "black folk." *The Souls of Black Folk* is a blending of Du Bois's personal beliefs, the trials of blacks in the South, and a sociological commentary on the person of African descent in the United States. Thus, the book provides for the reader a glimpse into the quintessence of African-American culture. One of the most notable chapters in the book discusses Du Bois's feelings concerning the most influential African-American leader, Booker T. Washington.

A contemporary of Du Bois was the educator Booker T. Washington, whose message of accommodation, job training, and material gain Du Bois openly criticized. Washington's message, in Du Bois's view, was one that worked within the stereotypes of social Darwinism. In "The Debate Between W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington" an Internet resource of PBS's Frontline, Washington's philosophy of accommodation is illustrated:

He urged blacks to accept discrimination for the time being and concentrate on elevating themselves through hard work and material prosperity. He believed in education in the crafts, industrial and farming skills and the

cultivation of the virtues of patience, enterprise and thrift. This, he said, would win the respect of whites and lead to African-Americans being fully accepted as citizens and integrated into all strata of society. (1)

Du Bois believed the best way to elevate the condition of African-Americans was for African-Americans to work towards personal growth and education.

Washington's belief that African-Americans had "to prove themselves worthy of the rights many thought they had already won" was contrary to the social and political reforms Du Bois propagated (Blumberg 18).

*In The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois addresses what he believes is the narrow view of Washington. Du Bois questions Washington's public popularity, and notes that Washington's efforts met with little resistance from the oppressive white community, stating that Washington "is certainly the most distinguished Southerner since Jefferson Davis, and the one with the largest personal following" (Du Bois 634). It was a pernicious comment to the most significant race leader of the time.

In addition, Du Bois suggests that one of the reasons for Washington's success is that he does not ask enough of the oppressive society of turn of the century America. Washington's theory of accommodation discourages entreating one's oppressors for what one really wants and needs. By asking for only the smallest of social reforms and accepting the racism of the day, Washington believed that African-Americans could earn the respect of American society. This "wait and see" approach of Washington's shifted social responsibility off of the white oppressors, and allowed the oppressors to make only the small insignificant changes. According to Du Bois, the response of the oppressors to small request is likely to be, "if that is all you and your race ask, take it" (Du Bois 635). This approach does not encourage generosity towards the oppressed from the oppressors. In other words, Washington's status among whites may be due to not making the socially incompatible requests.

Washington's narrow view led many of the black intellectuals of his day to privately criticize him. *In The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois states, "Among his own people, however, Mr. Washington has encountered the strongest and most lasting opposition" (Du Bois 635). Du Bois was outspoken in his political activities. He strongly encouraged African-Americans to pursue goals of enlightenment and education. Du Bois discouraged the acquisition of material wealth at the expense of personal growth. His discipline and ideals sparked a move within the African-American community from the accommodation of Washington to the social protest

that became the hallmark of the Civil Rights movement. The person of Malcolm X demonstrates the liberal point of view during the Civil Rights movement.

Malcolm X was the voice of radical reform during the early years of the Civil Rights movement. His call for social reform encouraged the African-American community to separate from white society in order to work for change from within their own society. Malcolm X was motivated and inspired by the Nation of Islam, led by Elijah Muhammad (Poole, members are encouraged to drop their slave name). The Nation of Islam has been described as "amalgamating elements of Christianity and Mohammedanism and spiked with a black-supremacy version of Hitler's Aryan racial theories" (Haley 1). The Nation of Islam became a support system during Malcolm's young adult years.

Malcolm's father was a pupil of Marcus Garvey, a militant black separatist of the 1920s, and while living in Lansing, Michigan, Mr. Little's (Malcolm's slave name) home was violently attacked by the Ku Klux Klan. As Malcolm states in the *Playboy* interview: "One of my earliest memories is of being snatched awake one night with a lot of screaming going on because our home was afire" (qtd in Haley 9). Shortly after, Malcolm's father was murdered, and his mother was no longer able to raise her children, who were separated into foster homes.

Young Malcolm was sent to live with a white family, and he attended an all white school where he excelled in his studies and sports. In the eighth grade, however, Malcolm left school, went to Boston, and became a train porter. It was through his work on the train that Malcolm first felt the lure of easy money. Crime soon became a way of life for Malcolm, and he was a major player. Due to his crime activities, Malcolm was sent to prison where he heard the call of the Honorable Elijah Mahammad. While in prison, Malcolm began to read and study, and when he was released from prison, Malcolm started to make his rise to power within the Nation of Islam (Haley 1 - 9).

As a minister for the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X began to teach a message of black supremacy and self-reliance. In Alex Haley's article for *Playboy*, Malcolm is quoted as saying, "Messenger Muhammad restores our love for our own kind, which enables us to work together in unity and harmony. He shows us how to pool our financial resources and our talents, then to work together toward a common objective" (2). Malcolm's message also applauded separation and not integration. As Malcolm explains: "Mr. Muhammad teaches that as soon as we separate from the white man, we will learn that we can do without the white man just as he can do without us" (qtd in Haley 2). The separate self-reliance that Malcolm spoke of



needed land to work, "we must have land of our own" (qtd in Haley 2). As a result of the desire for separation and the need for land it has been reported that "in 1961 X held a secret meeting with the Klan on Elijah Muhammad's behalf, seeking the Klan's aid (since both groups opposed racial mixing) in obtaining land for the Nation of Islam to employ in implementing its separatist philosophy" (Dyson 124).

Malcolm is most remembered for the strong words he had for white people. Malcolm often referred to all whites as "devils," who had intentionally misled and oppressed African-Americans. Malcolm states in the *Playboy* article, "it's a case of seeing the true nature of the white man. We're [the Nation of Islam] anti-evil, anti-oppression, anti-lynching. You can't be anti-those things unless you're also anti-the oppressor and the lyncher" (qtd in Haley 4). Malcolm, however, does not say the he hates the white man, "the white isn't important enough for the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and his followers to spend any time hating him" (Haley 4). Malcolm's rhetoric was one of separation, but he was careful about openly demonstrating hate towards whites.

During his pilgrimage to Mecca—all Muslims should make this trip at least once—Malcolm had a change of heart towards the white man and, more importantly, towards Elijah Muhammad. While in Mecca, Malcolm saw whites as fellow Muslims and human beings rather than devils.

It was when I first began to perceive that "white man," as commonly used, means complexion only secondarily; primarily it described attitudes and actions. In America, "white man" meant specific attitudes and actions toward the black man, and toward all other non-white men. But in the Muslim world, I had seen that men with white complexions were more genuinely brotherly than anyone else had ever been. That morning was the start of a radical alteration in my whole outlook about "white" men. (qtd in Dyson 115 - 116)

Malcolm's experiences at Mecca and a growing dissatisfaction with the morality of Muhammad caused Malcolm to rethink his previous beliefs. It is believed that while Malcolm was in Mecca he had a conversion to the true Islam faith. While in the United States, Malcolm had often met "generally white-complexioned" Muslims (Siddiqui 3). These people often tried to persuade Malcolm to consider the path of "true Islam" (Siddiqui 3). This transformation in Malcolm led to his departure from the Nation of Islam. Less than a year after his pilgrimage, Malcolm X was assassinated.

After Malcolm returned home from the pilgrimage, white society was more

than a little skeptical about Malcolm's change of heart. Malcolm is reported to state:

You're asking me "Didn't you say that now you accept white men as brothers?" Well, my answer is that in the Muslim world, I saw, I felt, and I wrote home how my thinking was broadened! Just as I wrote, I shared true, brotherly love with many white-complexioned Muslims who never gave a single thought to the race, or to the complexion, of another Muslim. (qtd in Siddiqui 6)

The skepticism of the white press was no longer a concern for Malcolm. Malcolm now considered his struggle as one of political power. He now called himself a "black nationalist freedom fighter" (X 90). His focus in the Civil Rights movement had shifted from a religious perspective to a political one.

In his speech "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm X put his past religious rhetoric in the closet. He addressed the audience as a Muslim, but more importantly, he addressed them as a man battling for political power. Malcolm stated in his address, "until we become politically mature, we will always be misled, led astray, or deceived, or maneuvered into supporting someone politically who doesn't have the good of our community at heart" (X 91). Malcolm began to work for the economic good of his community as well: "the economic philosophy of black nationalism only means that we should own and operate and control the economy of our community" (X 91). It is at this point in his public life that Malcolm X begins to sound like Dr. Martin Luther King.

Some believe that the approaches of King and X were at odds with each other. King's style was understandable and acceptable to the white community, and King did not openly attack it. Malcolm was, for most of his adult life, openly harsh on the white race. After his journey to Mecca, Malcolm was less of a religious radical.

Most Americans believe that X and King occupied violently opposed ethical universes, that their positions on the best solution to America's racial crisis led them to a permanent parting of paths. More likely, though, they were the yin and yang of black moral reposes to white racism, complementing more than contradicting each other in their last years. (Dyson 120)

Both Malcolm X and Dr. King understood the need for the African-American community to work towards self-reliance. The views of both men were blending together to give the African-American community a new focus. "Malcolm and Martin moved away from the extremes of their original positions and began to

embrace aspects of each other's viewpoints" (Cone qt. in Dyson 120). King began to address black pride and a short-term segregation, while Malcolm became more political.

The work of leaders in the Civil Rights movement has gained some ground for the African-American community. While much work needs to be done, the philosophy of the liberal leader has done much, and it will continue to improve the status of African-Americans. In her poem "Still I Rise," Maya Angelou states:

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But, still, like dust I'll rise (lines 1 - 4).

The work of Du Bois and Malcolm X is the embodiment of this poem. No matter what others said to them, Du Bois and X kept working towards the goal of improved conditions for all African-Americans. Their liberal views were often criticized by conservative members of their own race, but W. E. B. Du Bois and Malcolm X continued to share their message of an avenue for change within the African-American community.



*Lesia M. Cotto*

## **“READER I MARRIED HIM”<sup>1</sup>: Miscegenation in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel**

**A**merican society, in recent years, has engaged in a public debate about the circumstance of multiracial individuals. Some multiracial members of American society have challenged census questionnaires that do not allow for the identification of more than one ethnic identity. The forced identification with one ethnic group—often the minority group—has caused some individuals to publicly wonder what their true racial heritage is. While the media has given time to the multiethnic question for a number of years, this question has been a part of the American “melting-pot” since the early pioneers settled on the shores of this “new-world.” Whether they originated from, migrated to, or were taken by force, individuals from various parts of the globe were suddenly a part of the same society. The natural outcome of such a situation was miscegenation or cross ethnic and racial sexual relationships. Early leaders in the American colonies discouraged these relationships; however, societal pressure did little to stop multiethnic sexual relationships. In his book, *Amalgamation*, James Kinney discusses early evidence of miscegenation: “Despite records of early and continual attempts by colonial leaders to ban miscegenation both within and outside of marriage, by the time the English colonies became the United States, more than 60,000 people of mixed black and white ancestry lived in the new country” (4). The white slave owner and black mistress were not the only form of miscegenation that was practiced in the infant colonies: “Many frontier whites in the colonial era had extensive sexual contacts with Indians, but ... few had permanent relationships” (Kinney 4). The reality of multiethnic relationships in early American society became incorporated into the literature of America. The work of three nineteenth-century women authors incorporates miscegenation into the tapestry of their novels. Lydia Maria Child, Catherine Maria Sedgwick, and Frances Harper deal directly with miscegenation. By focusing on the family unit as a microcosm of the larger society, the novels of these three authors demonstrate problems inherent in a diverse society.

1 Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Chapter XXXVIII.

Each of these women provides a unique perspective on miscegenation, and by using the family as a microcosm for the larger society, each novel presents a unique view of racial problems in the United States. In the work of Lydia Maria Child, the marriage of Hobomok to Mary Conant portrays a relationship based on confusion and perceived insanity. The work of Catherine Maria Sedgwick demonstrates that a multiethnic relationship can work; however, such a marriage is not possible in the white culture. The novel, *Iola Leroy* by Frances Harper, presents the point of view of the progeny of a multiethnic union. Iola and her family act as a connection between white and black society.

Lydia Maria Child was a prolific writer of the early 19th century, and her work was liberal and often controversial. She wrote on a wide variety of subjects, but "Most startling was her celebration of mixed-race unions, a view that placed her head-to-toe with the censors" (Romeyn 1). *Hobomok*, by Child, is a novel set in the early colonial days of America. While a great deal of the novel discusses Puritan ideals and way of life, a significant feature of the novel is the marriage of Mary Conant and the Native American Hobomok. Mary marries Hobomok after the death of her mother, and when she believes her true love to be dead. The relationship of Mary to Hobomok is viewed negatively by both Mary's Puritan society and the society of Native Americans: "Hobomok's connexion with her [Mary] was considered the effect of witchcraft on his part, and even he was generally avoided by his former friends" (Child 136). The implication of this statement is that Mary would have to be under great mental stress to submit to the "magic" of Hobomok.

Early in the novel, Mary dabbles with the supernatural. Mary performs a pagan ritual in order to understand her fate; however, this ritual puts Mary at odds with the Puritan society which believes strongly in the idea of predestination (a belief that God has planned the path of an individual's life before birth). In his article "Child's Hobomok," Tom Petijean suggests a possible reason for the use of the supernatural by Child:

By invoking the supernatural through mystical ceremonies and dreams, Child is able to point the way toward a possible resolution of early America's race and gender relation in a manner that would perhaps forestall protests of miscegenation by readers of her generation. The reader is led to believe that it takes an act that is less Christian than pagan and savage for this marriage to take place (1).

Mary's connection with the supernatural is paradoxical because she is regarded with favor by her community: "I grant the maiden had many charms [charms may

suggest the supernatural], and much seeming goodness in speech and behaviour" (Child 129). The notions of predestination and the supernatural blend to demonstrate that Mary's decision to marry Hobomok is not an act of free will. As Petijean states, "The concept of preordination—a premise of the Puritan religion—is carried out throughout the novel to lend credence to the idea that Mary's fall into an interracial marriage is beyond her control" (1). Mary's marriage to Hobomok, however, does seem to be one that grows into genuine love and affection.

Mary and Hobomok develop a loving and satisfying relationship: "I speak truly when I say that every day I live with that kind, noble-hearted creature, the better I love him" (Child 137). In addition, the union produces a child. Mary's marriage lasts for three years, and a kind of acceptance of Hobomok is expressed by Sally: "He [Hobomok] seems almost like an Englishman" (Child 137). In order for the acceptance of Hobomok to occur, he must be perceived as an Englishman. Nevertheless, the marriage of Hobomok and Mary ends in divorce with the return of Charles Brown, Mary's true love. The son of Mary and Hobomok is assimilated into the culture of the Puritans: "His father was seldom spoken of; and by degrees his Indian appellation was silently omitted" (Child 150). As Charles re-enters the life of Mary, she explains her marriage to Hobomok: "When I heard you too were gone, my reason was obscured" (Child 148). Clearly, Mary is apologizing for her insanity.

Child is not the only nineteenth-century author to cite mental condition as a cause or reason for miscegenation. In *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick presents an idea of miscegenation not directly caused by insanity. Domhnall Mitchell, in the article "Acts of Intercourse: 'Miscegenation' in Three 19th Century American Novels," states: "The ... implication is that there is something inherently irrational about any woman who'd want to marry an Indian. There is a similar message in *Hope Leslie*, where Faith is contented with her marriage to Oneco only because she is child-like and simple minded" (130). Unlike Child, Sedgwick's conception of the multiethnic relationship is not a part of the conventional Puritan culture.

The marriage of Hobomok to Mary is an important feature of Child's novel; however, as Stephanie Wardrop states in "Last of the Red Hot Mohicans: Miscegenation in the Popular American Romance": "Sedgwick's narrative allows for miscegenation, then, but only by minor characters. Magawisca can never marry Everell" (3). Sedgwick's novel does not allow for Faith's marriage within Puritan society. Indeed, when Magawisca informs Hope of Faith's marriage to Oneco, Hope's reaction is one of shock and horror: "'Yes, Hope Leslie, thy sister is married to Oneco.' / 'God forbid ... My sister married to an Indian!'" (Sedgwick 188). Hope's



alarm at Faith's situation is further demonstrated when the sisters are reunited: "She [Hope] saw her [Faith] in her savage attire, fondly leaning on Oneco's shoulder, her [Hope's] heart died within her" (Sedgwick 227). Hope's reaction seems out of place in light of her earlier actions. Earlier in the novel, Hope had treated the Native Americans in the story with kindness. She even risked her own life to secure the freedom of Nelema, a Native American medicine woman accused of witchcraft.

Hope is drawn as a "hopeful" person in book one of *Hope Leslie*. Her daring rescue of Nelema clearly demonstrates her compassion for all people. Hope's reaction to Faith / White Bird's marriage seems out of character. Judith Fetterley discusses Hope's inconsistent behavior in the article "My Sister! My Sister!: The Rhetoric of Catharine Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*":

While we [the reader] may understand why Hope views her sister as lost, we are less able to see why she should care so much, since she has been separated from this sister for years and has lived quite hopefully without her. Nor can we readily understand why she finds her sister's Indianness sickening and disgusting, since up to this point Hope's interactions with Indians have fallen within the liberal humanist and unitarian position of respect, recognition of essential sameness, and in the case of Nelema, one might argue, even covert identification (504).

The implication of Hope's reaction to Faith's marriage would appear to be that the marriage of a white woman to any non-white man is unacceptable in the American culture. As Mitchell states in "Acts of Intercourse": "instances of Whites becoming assimilated by Indians far outnumber instances of reverse acculturation" (128). Indeed, at the end of the novel, White Bird (Faith) leaves the White settlements to live with Oneco: "They [White Bird and Oneco] had effected their escape together" (Sedgwick 338). So, the marriage of Oneco and White Bird is possible in the Native American community. However, in the literature of African Americans, there would seem to be a role in society for the progeny of multiethnic unions.

In the novel *Iola Leroy*, by Frances Harper, Iola, who is of mixed heritage, returns to the South after the Civil War to assist the newly freed slaves. The novel discusses two topics that relate to miscegenation as Kinney states in *Amalgamation!*: "The work creates an image of blacks that destroys the Plantation Tradition stereotypes, and it answers the question of where the mulatto belongs" (186). Iola and her brother Harry must deal with the question of being able to pass as white. The question of miscegenation's morality is deflected, and the narrative

examines the problem of the offspring of a mixed race marriage. Despite the fact that Iola, Harry, and Dr. Latimer can pass for white, "all determine to align themselves with their maternal race, despite the personal loss which that means for each" (Kinney 188).

Harper presents the issue of miscegenation differently than Child or Sedgwick. In the work of Child, the marriage of Hobomok and Mary is the result of a weak mental condition. Whereas in Sedgwick's novel, the marriage of Oneco and Faith is understood to be a relationship outside of the Puritan culture, and in fact, the marriage cannot exist—symbolized by Faith's escape with Oneco—in white society. Frances Harper is an African-American. As Kinney states:

White writers, whether condemning or defending miscegenation, treat the subject as immensely charged, as filled with socially and morally explosive implications, reflecting the white culture's oft noted need to deny the reality of miscegenation in the United States. If one pretends that something just doesn't exist, then any admitted instance necessarily carries the potential to disrupt the whole order built on the denial (189).

In Harper's work, miscegenation is examined as a fact of life: "Interracial sex is treated not as an awesome taboo, but as a common fact of life, with black characters casually joking about the subject among themselves" (Kinney 189).

When Uncle Daniel relates his story, Robert states: "'Isn't funny ... how these white folks look down on colored people, an' then mix up with them'" (Leroy 27).

Harper's treatment of mixed race sexual contact may be due to Harper's own racial identification.

Ironically, the sexual relations of blacks and whites is not questioned as immoral, only the marriage of a white man and his slave wife. The sexual relationship between the races is accepted among the whites in the novel as well. Leroy's cousin, Lorraine, wonders why Leroy would marry Marie:

Why, Eugene [Leroy], it is impossible that you can have an idea of marrying one of your slaves. Why, man, she is your property, to have and to hold to all intents and purposes. Are you not satisfied with the power and possession the law gives you? (Harper 65).

Clearly, Lorraine believes that a sexual relationship is possible; however, a marriage to a slave is morally wrong. Leroy addresses the issue of children: "if I make her [Marie] my lawful wife and recognize her children as my legitimate heirs, I subject myself to social ostracism and a senseless persecution" (Harper 66). So, sexual contact with other races is an understood concept, but the question of the product

of this contact is dealt with more seriously in this work.

The novel discusses the issue of mixed race sexual contact. Bastine relates the story of two girls who believed they were white. The girls only discovered their true heritage when their father died: "They both died, poor girls. I believe they were as much killed by the blow as if they had been shot" (Harper 100). Obviously, the effects on the children of these sexual unions were devastating.

Despite the devastating news of her true heritage, Iola comes to terms with her identity, and embraces the former slaves. Acceptance of the heritage of her mother, Iola (as well as Harry and Latimer) defines the role of the individual of mixed heritage. Iola and her family bridge the gulf between the white race and the former slaves. By using the education that they have been allowed to receive to help others, Iola and her family carve out a new niche in society. After slavery, the new free society needed the bridge that the multiethnic individual could provide. The creation of a new society began, one that could work towards a better future.

While all the racial problems of our culture have not been solved, progress has been made. The work of these three authors provide differing views on the multiethnic sexual relationship. While none of these works presents a holistic view, the body of work that they create presents a multifaceted portrait of the role miscegenation has played in American culture. Using the family unit as a microcosm of the larger society, a picture of the dynamic of the American "melting pot" is established. The American society is manufactured of people from various nations and ethnic backgrounds. Questions of race still present a problem in our culture; however, miscegenation is no longer a social taboo in our society. The work of these nineteenth-century authors can still speak to the nation today on racial issues. Kinney states that, "In 1662, Virginia enacted the first statute prohibiting intermarriage, and by 1725 six other colonies had followed suit" (5). Laws of this nature have been repealed in the United States, and a place has been created for individuals in our culture.



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## REFLECTIONS ON ART:

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## CREATIVITY IN PRISON

**E**verything I have ever read regarding creativity has been positive: "Creativity Can Be This" and "Creativity Can Be That." You have your "How To Be More Creative" and "Creativity in Ten Easy Steps." You have your "How To Raise a More Creative Child" and even stories of how to creatively get out of trouble. There are about a million more works of literature that I'd rather not list, but nowhere in any of these books is one entitled "How To Be Less Creative," or "How To Raise a Less Creative Child." You get the general idea that creativity is positive.

In an article entitled "Where is Creativity?" M. Csikszentmihaly asserts that an idea must be put "in terms that are understandable to others, it must pass muster with the experts in the field, and finally it must be included in the cultural domain to which it belongs" (27) in order to be considered creative. According to Csikszentmihaly, a domain is defined as the collective set of rules and procedures one follows, and a field consists of professionals or gatekeepers of the domain. Cultural creativity is any act, idea or product that changes an existing domain (28). With these definitions in mind, then, I ask you: When inmates produce and conceal weapons in prison, are they being creative? And, if so, is this creativity positive?

Csikszentmihaly would certainly say "yes" because the making and hiding of weapons fits his criteria: Inmates come up with ideas that are understandable to other inmates, the experts in the field are the inmate gang leaders who possess power, and the cultural domain is the convicts' code.

However, one can also answer "no" to this question. Inmates come up with ideas that are not acceptable to society in general (that's why they're in prison in the first place), the experts in the field are not always consulted about such a covert operation as the production and concealment of weapons, and the motivation for such creativity is sometimes fueled by the desire to circumvent the convicts' code. Whether or not this form of creativity in prison can be said to be positive is also a matter of perspective. From an inmate's perspective, homemade weapons may appear vital to survival. However, a correctional officer will view them as nothing but safety hazards.

Inmates have a domain; it's called the convicts' code. They must abide by this code if they want to survive. The code consists of two basic rules: Don't be a snitch and always act as macho as possible. If you ever find yourself doing time,

this code will be what you live by because if you snitch, you're going to piss someone off (or the friend or gang member of that someone) who has nothing to lose by stabbing your guts out.

This may seem quite harsh until you think about it. There are guys in prison who have multiple life sentences, and their only recreation consists of walking in a circle for five minutes once every 24 hours. So if they happen to get the chance to earn some status and stab a snitch, chances are it's not going to cause them much grief.

One time, out of the blue, while I was taking count, an inmate came toward me, yelling, "I'm going to drag you down this hallway and shake you up." I had no idea that he was doing this just to force me to punish him by placing him in segregation until I discovered that he was in deep trouble with his peers. But even after being given this information, an uninitiated free person might still be mystified and ask, "Why didn't the inmate turn himself in instead of creating a scene?" One must realize that in the criminal community a man is expected to face death without saying a word. This is dictated by the convicts' code. But a man in trouble with his peers may possibly appease them or even gain status if he can do something outrageously creative (like yelling at me) to show machismo. By displaying public disdain for the law and acting out against authority, he gains a chance for survival. And as long as he doesn't get busted, he has creatively changed the domain by demonstrating that he doesn't have to follow the rules. The act of turning to a correctional officer for help, however, would have been uncreative and sealed this inmate's death warrant. At the very least, it would have said to the inmate community, "I'm nothing but a scaredy-cat chicken. Come and rape me."

In numerous other ways, inmates use their creativity to survive. Many show their creativity and achieve status by producing and concealing a variety of weapons. The most common weapon that I have encountered as a Department of Corrections (DOC) employee is a shank. The word "shank" is prison jargon for a homemade knife. Now, a free member of society may ask, "What's so creative about making a knife?" My answer is that inmates have to be creative in selecting materials and in manufacturing the weapon so that they don't get caught. After all, they can't just walk down to their local hardware store and get supplies; nor can they sneak a piece of metal, a pair of scissors, or other potential shank material without it being revealed in a search. Prisoners are allowed food and drink, however, and I have seen shanks made from such.

Specifically, an inmate may make what is known as a T-bone shank. The name is self-explanatory. He sharpens a T-bone which he then conceals until he wants to use it for powerful jabs. Another shank, more creative and unusual than the T-bone, can be made from Dixie cups. An inmate can melt and form the wax coating on these cups into an unbelievably hard plastic. The amazing part is that the materials needed to create these shanks and many others like them are distributed right to the inmate, and so he cannot get in trouble for possessing them. He can only be busted while he is processing or after he has processed the material into contraband, which the DOC defines as anything prohibited by its policies or local, state, and federal law.

Sometimes inmates who feel that they are in danger will make, or have another inmate make for them, a stabproof vest. Most commonly, these vests simply consist of books tied in place over vital organs. These are commonly discovered upon routine shakedowns, when an officer searches an inmate's person. However, a more creative stabproof vest can be made out of dental floss and scotch tape, which an inmate will accumulate by trading cigarettes for them with other inmates. This vest is harder to detect because it conforms to the body better than books.

Inmates not only make weapons, they also conceal them. That little T-bone shank can be concealed quite easily. But hiding a big, sword-like shank, called a "hawk" in prison jargon, requires much more ingenuity. One such hawk, which had been made by melting down the plastic cover that fits over a four-foot fluorescent bulb and then painstakingly reshaping it, was so elaborate that it even had a handle. The downside for the inmate who crafted it is that he was not creative enough to find a place to store it. This particular hawk was found inside another inmate's mattress and both men got in trouble. Next time, they will need to be more creative.

Concealing contraband requires remarkable creativity. To my knowledge, no one has yet been found guilty of making the four-foot hawk discovered in a Westville Correctional Center broom closet. The maker of this hawk was certainly creative. He sharpened the end and the edge of a wooden broomstick and then equipped it with a handle made from shoe leather. The real kicker about this hawk was that it came packaged in its very own hiding place—a hollow, plastic broom.

Stabproof vests may offer some protection against weapons; however, creativity in weapon-making does not end with shanks and hawks. Did you know that most inmates have access to guns? "How?" you may ask. Well, despite the



best efforts of the DOC, producing weapons and concealing them is a popular prison pastime, a source of pleasure and pride, and a means of achieving rank or status in the prison population. A creative inmate may look around his living quarters, then make himself a gun by simply taking a pipe or rolled-up magazine and attaching a spring and a handle from a water faucet to it. In addition, tattoo guns can be made from Walkmans and ballpoint pens, and rope made from braided toilet paper can actually support a 200-pound man.

Creativity exists in prison because it is a survival skill. But does the inmate furtively engaged in making his shank, hawk or gun experience the "flow" which researchers describe as essential to real creativity?

Goleman, *et al*, state that a person caught up in the creative flow completely transcends time and place. In "The Art of Riding the White Moment," these researchers declare that creative flow can happen to anyone while doing anything in any domain. The only requirement is that an individual's skills match the demands of the moment so perfectly "that all self-consciousness disappears" (44).

In my opinion, inmates making and concealing weapons cannot allow themselves to get into this altered state. They must remain intensely self-conscious or they will be found out. Not only must they worry about their activities being discovered by staff, but by other inmates as well. Imagine you're the prisoner rooming with the inmate who made the hawk out of the plastic light-cover and that you find his "creation" hidden in your mattress. Not a pleasant thought, huh?

An inmate can certainly allow himself to lose his sense of self-consciousness and be caught up in the creative flow when he draws, sings, or otherwise engages in activities in which he need not feel threatened. When he is making and concealing weapons, though, however ingenious they may be, he cannot be said to be truly creative.

When I was a student in fifth grade, my teacher told me that a prisoner wrote our national anthem. And I remember thinking, "He probably wrote it because he needed something creative to do instead of being bored." I still think that; only now I realize that there is a difference between being a prisoner of war and being a criminal ward of the state. In either case, prisoners could learn a valuable lesson from Francis Scott Key, author of the "Star-Spangled Banner": do your time wisely and creatively.

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*Lesa M. Cotto*

## **“THE SNOW MAN”: THE CAREFUL OBSERVER**

**W**allace Stevens is a poet who paints with words in the way a painter uses the paint; visual imagery abounds in a Stevens’ poem. While the reader is able to envision the scenery of the poem, sometimes the meaning can be elusive. One such example is “The Snow Man.” In this poem, the poet unfolds a winter scene, but the poem is not merely a rich description of a snow-covered, pastoral setting. “The Snow Man” is not a creation of children, but a state of mind that enables an individual to live fully in the moment.

“The Snow Man” does not have a definable speaker. In the way a painting is observed, the poem is meant to be observed by the reader, in effect making the reader the speaker of the poem. As the poem is meant to be observed, the rural setting of the poem is meant to be observed. The poem is rich in visual imagery: “To regard the frost and the boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with snow” (2-3), “To behold the junipers shagged with ice, / The spruces rough in the distant glitter” (5-6). The poem, however, does not rely on visual imagery alone. Other types of images also appeal to the senses of the reader. “And have been cold a long time” (4) and “spruces rough” are forms of tactile imagery. “In the sound of a few leaves” (9) and “the sound of the land” (10) are examples of auditory imagery. Thus, the reader can not only create a mental picture of the winter scene but is, in addition, able to feel and hear the scene by the effective use of imagery. The reader is able to create a visual mental picture of the trees, the ice, and the snow, and then is able to feel the cold and hear the leaves.

Describing the snowy scene, however, is not the purpose of this poem. The first line prescribes a condition in the consciousness of the observer of the scene: “One must have a mind of winter.” The first line of the second stanza further restricts the observant mind: “And have been cold a long time.” These two lines link the mind of the observer with the physical condition of the scene about to be observed. In order to understand nature truly, one must be willing to be a part of nature. Rather than observing from a window, the careful observer desires to go see the sun shining on the snow and hear the wind blowing: “To behold the junipers shagged with ice, / The spruces rough in the distant glitter / Of the



January sun: and not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves" (7-9). The careful observer feels the cold, not as an unpleasurable condition, but as a part of the experience of observing the snow.

In the last stanza, the observer is transformed into a listener: "For the listener, who listens in the snow" (13). The careful observer does not merely observe with his eyes, but he involves various senses to comprehend the full experience. The observer sees, feels, and hears the winter landscape. The observer, in addition, does not bring to the scene anything that will hinder the observation of the scene: "One must have the mind of winter." The careful observer does not have the mind of a human observer. When one is in a state of careful observation, one is able to fully understand and appreciate what is seen: "nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (14-15). When the careful observer views the winter landscape, he brings no preconceived ideas. The careful observer is able to see the "nothing" created by the snow on the winter landscape. When snow covers the ground, everything disappears under a blanket of white. This creates the illusion that nothing is there. The careful observer (The Snow Man), however, does not bring anything to the scene that will not allow him to be a part of what he sees.

Wallace Stevens has effectively painted a picture of a winter day, but he has, in addition, painted a portrait of the mind of a man. Stevens has presented a view of a man who can see truly without preconceived ideas to obstruct his vision. For Stevens, an understanding of the natural world can lead to a greater understanding of the soul. The Snow Man is a person who lives in the moment, who is out and involved in life. Just as one cannot truly see the trees covered with snow by looking through a window, one cannot live life by not participating.

J. A. Carpenter  
**AIRING THINGS OUT**

"The frost makes a flower,  
The dew makes a star,  
The dead bell,  
The dead bell.

Somebody's done for."  
- Sylvia Plath's "Death & Co."

It is hard to recognize  
the faint smell of gas  
beneath the biting whip  
of cold wind coursing  
through the tiny apartment.  
The kids are nestled,  
secure in their blankets  
with milk and sandwiches  
for lunch when they awake.  
They may not see the wet towels  
under the door  
until later  
when they pull shut the window  
to stop the prickling breeze,  
leaving their bodies to freeze.

Her papers are strewn about  
by the chill and force of the air  
as if invisible hands  
angrily tossed her work about  
as she sits unmoving,  
almost sleeping,  
with her cheek on a small white cloth  
in the oven.



*Julia A. Nielsen*



Nancy C. Howell

## THE SCULPTING OF CHOICE

There is an intuitive, natural genius imbued in Harriette Simpson Arnow's main character in her novel *The Dollmaker*. Gertie Nevels isn't content to absorb religion on the level of her fellow Kentuckians and all of their learned rules, yet belief can drift into the grist of humanity in any form. Although Arnow implies throughout the story that Christ can be mislaid, this is forgivable in that belief is a matter of choice. If Gertie's task of carving a creative piece of wood and then choosing to destroy it can be realized as one act, then both actions, as a totality, could be appreciated as a metamorphosis or, in a religious sense, a transmutation.

Gertie is traditionally seen as "become [ing] utterly dislocated and corrupted" (Zorn 1). If this is taken to the reader's heart, then any deeper meaning will be lost in Zorn's criticism: "The book ends grotesquely as she takes an ax to her sculpture [of Christ], splitting it into small pieces in order to mass-produce dolls for quick money" (1). This harrowing interpretation need not be the only recourse for the reader. A more plausible ending could be realized as Arnow allows Gertie to be the master of her own plan, for Gertie is given a choice of what to do with her own creation.

The theme of cultural relocation is usually seen as the dismal end to the story of how a desperately poor woman tries to hold her family together in the Detroit of World War II. This holding together is difficult and this can be interpreted through even the smallest of gestures. Gertie often fingers her carving knife in her pocket. In Detroit the knife takes on a new prospect, as the police there might perceive it as a weapon. Gertie, however, perceives it as her key to spirituality. In fact, her oldest son Reuben also carries a knife and the sharp reminder of it in his pocket is too much for him. He will not give up carrying it, and he runs, but not away from anyone. He runs back to the hills of Kentucky.

The creative thrust of Arnow's story of war-time mid-America bristles in the undeclared war between mother and daughter, which begins in the hills of Kentucky. The world war is not the feature of the story but only acts as a catalyst, creating a situation of hardships and tense family relationships. Gertie's mother envisions a better life for her daughter's family in the industrial hell of war-time Detroit. She never understands that the purchase of land that Gertie has negotiated for her own family shows her daughter capable of a far-sightedness that is

admirable and that far outshines her impractical short-sightedness. Through Arnow's description of Gertie's appreciation for the land around her, the reader soon finds that poverty isn't beautiful but an inherent love for nature is. Poverty is a hardship made worse to those who don't appreciate the muses of nature.

Thus, the purchase of a piece of land by Gertie sets up a confrontation with her mother that seems to stem from an inherent discontent, very possibly born from a neglect to find what might have been her own creative soul. Her mother considers only the gossip spreading in the countryside and the scandal being attached to Gertie because she is a woman doing the unheard of: she is purchasing property without the knowledge of her husband. In the wake of Gertie's deal, her mother unwittingly sends her daughter's family to a spiritual death in the city. Ironically, it is Gertie's mother's own religious dogma that leads Gertie astray. It is her mother's frustration with her own lot in life that she extends to her daughter, when she tells Gertie to take her children with her and follow her husband, Clovis, to Detroit.

A woman cannot always explain her relationship to the world only in the sacred act of conceiving, bearing, and raising children. Such an emergence is God's creativity. Beyond childbirth, the attempt to create any extended experience with artistic endeavor honors the self in the realm of human spirituality. Thus, inserting only a smattering of dialogue into the novel regarding the secular and the religious, Arnow explores her own creativity of writing through another creativity, that of whittling and wood carving, wherein she creates a spiritual vehicle for her character. This creativity connects Gertie with her own world through artistic endeavor. And as some readers may have only a recreational need for Christ, the writer reveals all of His manifestations through Gertie, who insists on finding her own god.

The carving is an evocation of the trees that are integral to the story as the symbols of Gertie's abandoned home. Because she has hewn Christ from the woods, she transports Him as a sort of half-image of her home in a seemingly futile attempt to settle the symbols of nature in the industrial world. Well aware of its already broad shoulders, Gertie is desperate to give her carving the human quality of a face, and this she contemplates throughout the story. This contemplation concludes in a metamorphosis. Even in the midst of Gertie's dismal reality and the destruction of the Christ figure at the end of the story, the reader might attempt to find a kind of optimism as Gertie is extended back to her beloved nature. Gertie is eventually commissioned to carve woodland creatures which become an extant of

her natural home.

Gertie has a religious innocence that shows her lack of social and religious know-how, especially when she attempts to shop in her neighborhood on Good Friday, the traditional Catholic anniversary of Christ's death. She carries a symbolic "Josiah" basket (a homemade wonder that a teacher in her children's elementary school is especially drawn to for its artistic simplicity) that she brought with her from Kentucky. Gertie remembers only that it was "the Friday before Easter-time to plant beans back home" (Arnow 382). This is an irrational blunder in the eyes of her neighbors. Her oldest daughter, Clytie, must teach her: "Tres ore. It's when Christ was dyen on th cross. They tell yu over th radio to keep it, an it's somethen you gotta keep" (382). The readers, however, can hear the truly pristine heart of Gertie's inherent spiritual nature speaking when she says, "I ain't so certain Christ ever heared uv it either. . . . I'd lots ruther recollect him alive a goen to feasts and sich than on this . . ." (382).

Arnow fits a somewhat frustrated creativity into other women characters in the book. Mrs. Daly has a mean and pithy character that, at least temporarily, changes with the birth of her ninth child. Max is a sprightly neighbor, who dresses gaudily (though spiritedly), in spite of her husband's frugal pay. And most poignant is Gertie's association with Mrs. Anderson, a frustrated painter, who never finds the time to do what she considers is important for her well-being, because she is too often helping her husband with his thesis.

The loneliness and the "lostness" Gertie perceives in these and all women is realized one evening, while she is working on the Christ figure, the definition of which she pursues in earnest after her daughter and soul mate, Cassie, is killed in a cruel train accident. Gertie's first words, when she returns home after Cassie's funeral, are for the whereabouts of the block of wood. "All her life she'd needed time for this, and now she had time only, years and years of it to get through; but the man in the wood was strong; he could pull her through the time" (Arnow 415). It is Cassie, then, who claims God in a lily flower pressed in Gertie's old buttermold. Cassie and her imaginary friend Callie Lou, lovingly brought from the hills of Kentucky and in constant attendance of Cassie, would seem to be the sacrificial Christ and His traditional Holy Spirit.

During the slow and nightmarish recovery from her child's death, Gertie works on the body of Christ. Seeing the coat she has carved upon Him as a thin wrap, she thinks of all the women around her, perhaps envisioning them wrapped in their small apartments. She certainly has a latent intuitive empathy for them. The



reader might think of how the women also have the physical disadvantage of being trapped in their own bodies, like Gertie has unwittingly trapped Christ in a block of wood; and one passage explores the plight of all women.

The world, the block of wood were not herself. She realized that for a long time, maybe all the while she worked, she had been listening; it wasn't clear two walls away; Detroit, even in its sleep, was too noisy to let human crying come so far . . . .Why so much sorrow, like the man that they had beat him so? . . . .Mrs. Anderson was most likely crying by her wall, sorrowful because she had a man and children. Mrs. Bommarita cried by her wall because her man was far away-maybe he flew tonight, a waist gunner, she'd heard say. And the pretty little Japanese woman so far from her home-maybe she cried, too. She realized she was tired, so tired the folds of cloth were blurring. But when she got into bed there was the crying—still pure sorrow, like Cassie crying for Callie Lou [Cassie's imaginary friend]. (Arnow 459)

In terms of creativity, the muse certainly wasn't imbued into Gertie's husband. When she uses her talent to make small crucifixes to sell to her neighbors upon their request, he gets the idea to mass-produce them and "rig up a jig-saw, cheap, that ud do th work in a tenth a th time, . . . That other Christ took too long, an he was ugly anyhow" (Arnow 367). Thankfully Gertie replies, "But I don't figure Christ er enybody in th Bible was pretty. They seen too much trouble" (367). There is her frustration in her facing this smaller form of industrialism throughout the story: "Gertie frowned a moment over the jigsaw . . . (and) turned abruptly away her hungry fingers opening and closing the knife in her pocket (477).

Even with all her requests, she feels only the crux of poverty and of time that haunts her creative muse and she thinks back to her always wanting to work with wood:

A feeling of guilt came over her, the same feeling she had used to have when in her girlhood she had waited by the spring until her bucket overflowed, and she let it flow on, lost in some whittling foolishness . . . . Now it was money she wasted when she whittled a thorn, a strand of hair, or a fold in the loincloth that didn't have to be there. (367)

Although she knows she is selling the dolls and crucifixes for money, "she felt clean working on the block of wood" (452) as the block of wood slowly becomes a body throughout the story. Thus, it is toward the end of the story that "the man in the wood brought some calmness to her; he was alive; the hands, the head, even the

face were there; she had only to pull the curtain of wood away, and the eyes would look down at her" (593).

It is the visit from Mrs. Anderson at the end of the story that precipitates the metamorphosis. Mrs. Anderson comes back to the neighborhood after moving to a more affluent one. She sees Gertie's Christ, after months:

I'm glad it's really good . . . It was my undoing . . . I remember when I first saw it at Max's—I didn't want to look. 'There's a woman,' I thought, 'who's never had a lesson in art, but with five children and nothing but a block of wood and a pocket knife, look what she's done. And look at me.' (Arnow 599)

With this statement the metamorphosis begins to end. Gertie may feel threatened, thinking that the Christ figure is no longer able to validate her personal search, that it only elicits unsolicited attention. Or perhaps the decision to split the intricately carved folds of cloth that cover the shoulders and flow down to the fingers of the fine, detailed hands comes with Mrs. Anderson's confession that she envies Gertie. Even with all the material items that Mrs. Anderson accumulates in her new life outside the "alleys," she still isn't happy. Perhaps Gertie is afraid to carve a face on the Christ figure, afraid that it is too expected after all this time, and afraid that it will never be what anyone will ever accept.

Thus, Arnow mightn't be read as a writer who gives her main character in *The Dollmaker* only a traditional religious affectation. Gertie's great block of carving could be interpreted as Gertie's own realization of humanity as a whole. This is so poignantly said in the dialogue of a few of the children as she carries the androgynous figure from her home. Some who saw it thought it was the Virgin Mary, and others thought it was Christ, the smaller children saying, "lookee, lookee, ut's a man. . . . It's a woman. . . . and a little Daly, running up, cried, It's a virgin (Arnow 607). The block of wood might also represent Gertie coming out of the backwoods of religious dogma to be symbolically splintered in a realization of the human values hidden, especially in the brave women in her poor neighborhood, whom she finally comes to appreciate.

It is true that she destroys the figure of the Christlike form in order for her to earn money to feed her family; however, her choice is not thrust upon her by her myopic mother or her insensitive husband. The choice to change the Christ figure, (yes *change*, not destroy), is made of Gertie's own volition. With her choice, she is able to share with all who would purchase a minute part of the environment, which both she and her daughter Cassie loved with every fiber of their souls. Gertie

changes the body of Christ into the smaller representations of nature. She carves the muses of the earth and the swifter muses of the air, the tiny shapes of animals and birds from the larger piece, as religion teaches that we humans are shaped from something larger. When Gertie and her family had first moved to the city, a black woman had told her, "In Detroit there are many Christs" (Arnow 238). Gertie realizes this as soon as she splits the wood: "Why, some o my neighbors down there in the alley—they would ha done" (608). Yes, they would have done as models for her Christ. But her choice had already been made, and it was hardly corrupt.

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## AN OMISSION IN BLUE

**N**otwithstanding the theories of various philosophers used in his essay, "A New Refutation of Time," Jorge Luis Borges concludes that time is the substance of which he is made: "Time is the river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire" (Yates 234). Borges had envisioned time as visiting him at night and in the weary twilight with the illusory force of an axiom (218). In a seeming despair and resignation in his failure to refute time within the means of his essay he ends by saying "The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges" (234).

Although Borges believes that all writing is only reading (he gathers his own fiction in concordance with the thoughts of great thinkers), he creates his own illusory force. In this Borges can be given credit for being so well read as to have realized that to explain his own reality to himself and to share his disassembling and reconstructive properties of his reading, he could develop his own construct; and thus he removes himself from the writers of the past to forge his own path.

Perhaps Borges had hoped to solve something for humankind, not wanting them any longer to be caught up in denial or despair, for near the end of his essay he gives himself away in the words, and yet, and yet. He uses the four words heightened by their ellipsis to refute humankind's denial of what he says are "secret consolations: temporal succession . . . the self . . . and the astronomical universe" (Yates 233). Yet, the four words denote continuation; each word folds back upon the other. In this action each word signals perpetuation, or time, introducing a language that leaves the essay open-ended, allowing Borges a path upon which he could release further refutation.

Language has only its symbols which are, outwardly comforting, a tissue of wind becomes the translation of everything: light in flux, time as ellipsis, an astronomical feature implying motion, a looping continuance . . . or, language might be a self-correction in and of its own creation.

Ivan Almeida questions Borges and Shakespeare in his essay "And yet, and yet . . ." *Une philosophie sans enonciation? (Borges et Wittgenstein)*," where Almeida supplies the term, self-correcting, when explicating the words, "and yet, and yet" in Borges's time essay (1). Almeida relates the linear arrangement of the four

words to a poetic device used by William Shakespeare in *The Two Gentleman of Verona*:

Silvia:

A pretty period! Well, I guess the sequel-  
And yet I will not name it-and yet I care not-  
And yet take this again-and yet thank you,  
Meaning henceforth to trouble you no more.

Speed: Aside

And yet you will; and yet another yet. (Almeida 6)

Almeida's idea of self-correction is important to both the prose writer and the poet. Borges and Shakespeare use it in a mode of self-correction in their use of the words *and* and *yet*. The word "*and*" conveys continuance, and the word "*yet*" conveys pause. Shakespeare employs this paradox of perpetual argument and resolution within his characters, as well as in the interaction of his own poetics. Borges uses "*and yet, and yet*" in his "Refutation" essay to catalog his despair and paradoxically his optimism in self-correction, when he finds it impossible to refute the existence of time.

Philosopher David Hume extends idea and impression in a discussion of the existence and sensation of color. In his comparison is mentioned the not impossible occasion for ideas to arise independently of their correspondent impressions (Penelhum 41). The blend of idea and impression seems to be the way that Borges absolves himself of fully developing his characters.

When Harold Clark Goddard writes of Shakespeare's methods of recapitulating scenes within other plays, Goddard writes in a language that can be used in the context of Hume's discussion of idea and impression:

. . . these metaphorical similarities (Hume's impressions) and echoes (Hume's ideas) are merely the signs of a more deep-lying organic connection. And here, again, dreams (the combination of impression and idea) illuminate the poetic mind. (Goddard 70)

Shakespeare's organic connection serves as a catalyst for readers to find themselves in various states of mental undress; he creates a nuptial contract with language and nature. This intimacy fully develops his characters within his poetry. Borges uses minimally developed characters to impose a nascent atmosphere in his stories. Whereas Shakespeare's essence is involved with developing the hope of human potential through the plot of human suffering, Borges suffers a new way closure in his writing, in that there is often felt a lack of resolution through his nebulous

characters.

This seeming unsteadiness would not be attributed to a traditional combination of real and imagined events in his stories, as many writers create in that way, but to his spiraling and tapering endings. Yet, the reading of them provides an illumination of his less organic sense of place. Order is created in the entropy of communication. Thus, he attempts to reconstruct time, making it a substance, an entity within language and syntax. But time also dissolves in the setting of his stories to operate in more of a light wave/ particle movement, his stories perhaps needing a new definition of genre, like the wave and particle essence needs a new word to define it in the scientific world.

Borges operates on Hume's sense of the abstract (previously inserted as a compliment of Goddard's thoughts on Shakespeare), where ideas are "faint and obscure" and tending to "be confounded with other . . . ideas, and "impressions either outward or inward, are strong and vivid" (Penelhum 43). This might well explain Borges's utilization, a sense of continuance in the omission of "blue" by the poet-character of his short story, "The Aleph." Hume states,

distinct ideas of colour . . . are really different though . . . resembling . . . each shade produces a distinct idea independent of the rest. For if this be denied, it is possible, by the continual graduation of shades, to run a colour insensibly into what is most remote from it . . . (Penelhum 41)

The color would be missed in the perception of the viewer if viewed from a continuous graduation of that color (41).

Borges's impression of a world, via Hume's omission of a certain shade of blue, is daubed upon the pallet of his writing style. In "The Aleph," Borges says of one of Daneri's poems, "He had revised them following his pet principle of verbal ostentation: where at first 'blue' hadn't been good enough he now wallowed in 'azures,' 'ceruleans,' and 'ultramarines'" (Monegal 157). In this story the character, Daneri, has only what the reader has, syntactical impressions of the same words, a temporary self-satisfaction afforded through the mutability of language.

When George McMurray calls Borges a writer of the absurd, grouping his fiction with those existentialists that create their characters as those in a vain quest for knowledge, McMurray has only constrained himself. Borges goes far beyond the absurdity concept. Although Borges would probably rather be defended by Hume, because of Hume's "succession of indivisible moments" (Yates 230), philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer eventually comes more closely to Borges's way of thinking, at least in the contemplation of time. In "Refutation," Borges actually concedes to



Schopenhauer's ideas on past, present, and future, even after accusing him of being in error regarding his philosophical definitions.

Arthur Schopenhauer would say, "much reading deprives the mind of all elasticity; it is like keeping a spring continually under pressure" (52). Emir Rodriguez Monegal and Alastair Reid, however, revel in Borges's acts of reading this way: "Because reading is at the core of everything he writes, Borges has erased the old distinctions among fiction, poetry, and essay" (ix). And although Schopenhauer wouldn't give Borges the credit for being a genius (Borges having read too much), Michel Foucault is more generous: "Language partakes in the world-wide dissemination of similitudes and signatures. It must, therefore, be studied itself as a thing in nature" (35).

McMurray accuses Borges of underdeveloping his fictional characters: ". . . Borges's characters . . . are the sum of their actions, . . . they are subordinate to plot and remain psychologically undeveloped" (3). How fortunate for the reader that Borges operates this way. This protects the reader from becoming too involved with and having empathy for the character. "Indeed, they emerge not as real people but as archetypal figures created solely to illustrate ontological situations or philosophical ideals" (149). This is an excellent way to protect the sense of place that is prominent in much of Borges's work.

McMurray also goes on to say:

The absurdity conveyed by Borges's works derives principally from three basic themes: the distrust of language as a means of depicting reality, the failure of human reason to unveil the mysteries of the universe, and the rejection of absolute moral or philosophical values. (McMurray 3)

To attribute a distrust of language to a man who has such an imaginative use of language (that which shackles even the best writer within certain constraints), seems to imply that his writing fails in his attempt to transcend his characters beyond the usual cause and effect of homogenous writing. The ascension of his characters is attempted with more than a mere quest for answers; Borges empowers his characters within the construct of scientific impressions. His is not a distrust of language but an entrepreneurial relocation of order.

According to important existentialist doctrine, the absurd, then, is "the metaphysical state of conscious man fully aware of inevitable death and nothingness; . . . reason pitted against chaos; . . . linking man with an alien world devoid of absolutes" (McMurray 2). In this theory nature is perceived as terrifying. It is even more frightening in its quietude, for we lack the language to fully describe it.

"Language in particular is deemed inadequate as a tool for depicting reality and bridging the gulf between the reasoning mind and the unreasoning universe" (McMurray 2). In the "Refutation" essay and in all of his writing, Borges confronts the terrifying element of language, knowing that he can't explain time, yet he attempts to with the before-mentioned sense of place.

The word "incommensurable," according to scientific philosophers Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, means "not intertranslatable" (Davidson 136). It is within the context of this idea that the reader is able to free himself of location in Borges's fiction. Borges forges a new path for connecting worlds or ideas in and of language that strive to commensurate a new set of values in his writing.

Borges himself says that he tends to "evaluate religious or philosophical ideas on the basis of their aesthetic worth and even for what is singular and marvelous about them" (McMurray 3). What better way to reconstruct? What better way to assume writing from reading? Hence, with reconstruction comes the idea of conceptual scheme. "Conceptual schemes . . . [are] points of view from which . . . one is able to survey the passing scene. Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as reality in one system may not in another" (Davidson 129).

Philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend suggests that we may compare contrasting schemes by "choosing a point of view outside the system or the language" (Davidson 136). This is the same point where Borges's language takes the reader outside the usual system with a new construct. Borges uses the parallels of the language of science as his own. He is not compelled to create order in his fiction; his is the entropy of reading and writing. When Feyerabend discusses the problems of the language used to explain scientific concepts he sounds as if he is attempting to explain a Borges fiction: "There are extremes that founder on paradox or contradiction; there are modest examples we have no trouble understanding. What determines where we cross from the merely strange or novel to the absurd?" (130).

Feyerabend thinks that anarchy would be a healthy climate for scientific study: "Any ideology that breaks the hold a comprehensive system of thought has on the minds of men contributes to the liberation of man. Any ideology that makes man question inherited beliefs is an aid to enlightenment" (Klempke 35). This is in direct relation to Borges's attempt at redefining humankind through what he has read. In revealing his mistrust of the language of science, Feyerabend would seem to be of the same thought when McMurray accuses Borges of a mistrust of the same. It doesn't seem that McMurray is willing to go outside the bounds of his

own conceptual relativism, however, to relate to Foucault's understanding of Borges's need to go outside of a traditional locus to create a new scheme. Borges encapsulates this idea by utilizing the argument of Feyerabend and Thomas Kuhn, who say philosophers have little hope of finding

a pure sense of datum language but assume that theories can be compared to a basic vocabulary. . . attached to nature . . .[and] independent of theory . . . no such vocabulary is available. In transition of one theory to the next words change their meanings or conditions of applicability. . . e.g. force, mass, element, . . . the ways in which some of them attach to nature has somehow changed—thus, we say, uncommensurable.

(Davidson 136)

If, as Davidson adds, language does "in a more banal, and yet in many more faceted way, exactly what science does" (135), then one could assume that this "banality" may be beneficial for the reader's search of probabilities. The "sophistication" of traditional literature may be rearranged to accommodate a Borges reality; much of his writing is preceded with quotes from philosophical and classical literature. He never loses his connection with what he has read, utilizing the classic authors to heighten a new scheme of literary development.

With the settling of underdeveloped characters in his stories, Borges removes the reader from the site, "the mute ground upon which it is possible for entities to be juxtaposed" (Foucault xvii). Whereas utopias offer an alternative to what is perceived as a disordered world, . . . "heterotopias are disturbing because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, . . . they shatter or tangle common names, . . . destroy 'syntax' . . . also—that less apparent syntax which causes words and things . . . to 'hold together' (Foucault xviii).

Nevertheless, Borges allows his readers to think for themselves, to find their own niche within the framework of the new site that he chooses. He allows the reader to focus on the possibilities of the plot, severing them from the probabilities to which traditional writers adhere. With his introduction of possibilities, he allows the reader to be the character.

Thus, Borges has little need for psychologically developed characters. He separates the plot from the character, leaving a rather nebulous observer, who operates like a famous ghost from a Shakespeare play; Hamlet's father insidiously leads his son to dissolution of place, or to a re-adjustment, or (in Hamlet's case) a mal-adjustment to new possibilities. With his old schematic ideas, McMurray poses



rather as another famous Shakespearean character, perhaps Ophelia, "immersed" in the past and floundering in the waters of traditional probabilities.

Borges knows this well. "The Alpeh" character, Daneri, who is a writer, could be the nemesis of Borges, who may be chastising homogenous writers with his emotionally underdeveloped character of Daneri, who possesses an enormous ego and little talent. A large thrust of the story is what the narrator finds behind the nineteenth step of the basement stairway, and upon that revelation the reader is pulled into another world. Daneri's compulsion to change the language with which he writes, especially his description of the color blue, however, is important to the story. No matter what he renames it the color is still blue, as he has visually, and sensually learned it to be blue. Yet, blue cannot be omitted because of the color's inability to be explained within language, nor dislodged from its place, as it is in connection with the flow of all color, as it is perceived in the 300 nanometers allowed to humankind in the color spectrum.

Borges knows that his embarking on the writing of "A New Refutation of Time" is a futility as he is well able to view his human self, as all readers must eventually view themselves, as a visual representation of the graduation of time. Nature makes no jumps. Borges follows Almeida's concept of self-correction as he shows that he is wanting, though unable, to refute what he can never really explain. The language doesn't, yet, exist; although Borges does his best to compensate with the help of what has already been tentatively named.

Davidson says that the "neutral content waiting to be organized is supplied by nature" (13). Borges draws what he knows of language and nature into his story, "The Library of Babel," utilizing the basic shapes in nature and confounding Schopenhauer in his philosophy: "Men of learning are those who have done their reading in the pages of a book. Thinkers and men of genius are those who have gone straight to the book of Nature; it is they who have enlightened the world and carried humanity further on its way" (Schopenhauer 52).

With Schopenhauer's statement leveled at the genius of Shakespeare's sort, Borges can still glean credit for having created a new world using nature, not only in a syntactical and, thus, observable way, but also in a metaphorical and unobservable way. He builds the "The Library of Babel" blending the six basic shapes of nature to organize his own conceptual scheme of the universe, and at the same time he utilizes Harold Goddard's metaphorical and organic connection within the six shapes. The first is the branch, symbolizing the syntax of words on a page, as one thought branches to another as an image, with the "buds" of commas and

periods. The second is the spiral: "The Library" stair spirals infinitely to nothingness, yet a spiral denotes the next, the ever-present helix: a "bonding of pairs of molecules to form a double helix of DNA" (Shapes), a graduation and combination of circular and spiral stair. Nature orders change onto itself as many-sided objects, the polygon being the fourth basic shape for the formation of water as ice and snowflakes, etc. In the story it is used as a hexagon in the basic reshaping of traditional ideas (Shapes). The meander, the fifth shape, can be seen in the text; it is the flow of words building up, and then changing course at the point of least resistance. In the "Library" Borges says that "This much is already known: for every sensible line of straightforward statement, there are leagues of senseless cacophonies, verbal jumbles and incoherences" (Yates 53). The sphere, the last shape, is that within which the "Library" is encompassed (52), the imagination of the writer.

Through his writing Borges is attempting to penetrate his own "impenetrable sphere," imagining his own intimate and spiraling helix within the "Library" (operating as story and entity) and admitting the frustrating nature of all humankind being trapped within themselves. And Borges utilizes in his essay on time, at least the image of time according to Arthur Schopenhauer, who asserts that "we might compare time to a constantly revolving sphere . . . the sinking . . . [is] the past, that . . . rising . . . [is] the future; . . . [and] the point at the top, would be the expressionless present" (Yates 233).

After traversing the surfaces of the theories of Hume, Davidson, Foucault, and Feyerabend, McMurray's assertions about Borges might be taken out of context to compliment him instead. "The fact that his characters tend to be faceless individuals set in archetypal situations is probably due to his belief that neither philosophy nor psychology have succeeded in defining man" (McMurray 149). Borges proves in his writing that no one is faceless or without vision, for the reader is allowed to be the character. Borges utilizes that which is wholly inherent, his imagination, an accumulation and a reshaping of his reading used to prove that only in redefining human beings can they be defined. Borges' stories show this repeatedly, founded in the self-correction which Ivan Almeida attributes to Shakespeare and which is also, in a very individual way, is utilized by Borges.

Perhaps to Borges the only writeable story was one that would reshape and redefine humankind through the absence of character development; he uses instead a formulation of language that self-corrects through self-examination, redefining perpetually. The reader, acting as observer, must accept what surrounds him or her

in perpetuity, the color blue in its gradual form, or time in its gradual and "expressionless" form.

Borges wrote a parable entitled "Everything and Nothing," wherein upon dying Shakespeare finds himself before God. Shakespeare asks Him to make him one man in that he had been so many in his writing. God answers from a whirlwind: "Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt the world as you have dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one" (Schoenbaum 14). If this is not redefinition, then nothing is.

And Borges, fortunately, is still Borges.

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*J. A. Carpenter*

## UNTITLED

His love was for the mighty  
inside black lettered lines,  
weaving imagination and emotion  
like a web...  
the readers are the prey.  
And he was a fly  
caught up  
in what was to be his life.  
And like Frost,  
when that web falls open  
displaying the innards,  
He'll say he chose the right  
road,  
wondering all the time  
if he was more like Dickinson  
as he shoved his heavy thoughts  
under the bed  
in a box.



*Julia A. Nielsen*





## CONTRIBUTORS

**Terri Bartels** is a non-traditional student working towards a bachelor's degree in elementary education. She occupies many positions: student, employee, homemaker, daughter, sibling, wife, mother, grandmother, pet-owner and friend. To this list, she proudly adds the achieved status of writer. In her spare time she sleeps!

**J. A. Carpenter** has attended PNC for five years and has been pursuing a degree in liberal arts with a concentration on Communications and English. She has been writing poetry since she was 16 and has minor publications including a poem in 360 Degrees magazine. She hopes to publish books of poetry and to find a job working for a publishing company or a magazine.

**Lesa M. Cotto** graduates in May 2000 with a bachelor's degree in English. She loves reading and writing poetry. Lesa will begin her graduate work at PNC and plans to teach composition in the fall.

**Danny Farrell** is majoring in biology at Purdue University North Central. After transferring from Manatee Community College (Florida) to PNC, he thinks Northwest Indiana, where he was raised, has been through many changes. In addition to his hobby of photography, his other interests include backpacking, tennis, and biotechnology. At M.C.C., English became one of his favorite subjects after studying haiku and Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" as well as writing the research paper in Professor Keyworth's English 101 course. Despite his renewed interest in communication, Danny misses the ocean and wants to see it soon!

**Elaine V. Gee** has attended PNC since 1998 and is planning to graduate with a bachelor's degree in Liberal Studies in spring 2001. She is non-traditional student returning to school after receiving an associate degree in general education from Illinois Central College in 1974. Her plan after graduation is to enroll in a Master of Social Work program at Indiana University-South Bend. Elaine's professional goals include counseling gay and lesbian youth.

**Kristina Handzlik** started classes at PNC during the summer of 1997 and has been going full-time ever since. She has the notion of putting forth all efforts to excel in one of these following areas: agriculture, business, communications, engineering, English, law, medicine, or veterinary care. She is currently in the process of discovering which area brings her the most enjoyment.

**Nancy C. Howell** happens upon little things, incorporating them into a celebration that is enhanced by her hope of teaching English. All of this is done through the support of her husband and her son, and through the encouragement of those who celebrate teaching.

**Phil Keller**, all through junior high and high school, was told of his untapped potential. It wasn't until he entered a college program, some 18 years later, that he truly began to explore the amazing potential of the human mind to learn and create. He believes "it's never too late to cultivate one's imagination."

**Janet Lee Lanning** is a transplant to LaPorte from Denver, Colorado. A freshman at PNC, she has discovered a love for writing, particularly personal essays. For Janet, writing is opening a new world, both within herself and in her surroundings. She enjoys biking, bowling, and being outdoors. She is majoring in sociology with the intention of being a social worker for troubled teens.

**Julia A. Nielsen**, a 1999 graduate of Marquette High School in Michigan City, plans a career in art and graphic design. During her time at Marquette, she was named the outstanding student in art for two consecutive years. She plans to eventually transfer from PNC to Ivy Tech to complete an associate degree in visual communication and then complete a baccalaureate degree at Columbia College in Chicago.

**Tessa Rampage** is currently in her first year at PNC, majoring in Liberal Studies. She plans on attending West Lafayette in the Fall 2000 semester in the Management Program. In the future she hopes to be a marketing manager or start her own clinic for kids who need special attention and physical therapy. In her free time, she hopes to shoot as many pictures as possible!

**David Riley** wants to thank everyone who had a hand in helping him discover this medium of communication: Dr. Jane Rose, who was not afraid to reach into the muck and mire that had consumed his life, and pull his head back above the surface; Professor Maxilyn Voss, who showed professionalism in a world that has forgotten the word; and Professor Joan Wiseman, who weathered his tantrums and introduced him to an ideology that was both refreshing and eye-opening. He would also like to thank all of the PNC professors who volunteer their time to come into this environment and educate the inmates. David does not know where he will be when this issue of *Portals* is published, but he will carry the memories of PNC with him. He plans to pursue a degree in social work, and he might just make it. David no longer bloodies his fist against the walls, because he has learned that the pen is mightier, and does not hurt him as much. This will be David's last entry for *Portals*.

"I was afraid to let the world see me  
I was afraid that they would not understand  
In a world where everything is meant to be broken  
I just want you to know who I am."  
— Goo Goo Dolls, "Iris," 1999.







